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INTRODUCTION

I have tried in this work to present an unretouched photograph of a small Southern town whose chief interest is religion, and whose chief social relaxation consists in discussion of the neighbors.

The critics will contend that a man of Wharton's type, schooled in all the niceties of civilization and arrogant by reason of his superior culture, would not succumb to the influence of an atmosphere so mean and so homely; my answer is that man is in large measure the product of his environment, and that those who have hurts to heal shed their sophistication and surrender without great struggle to simple kindness.

Perhaps Wharton's faith will not survive when he returns to the environment of his youth. As to that I do not know.

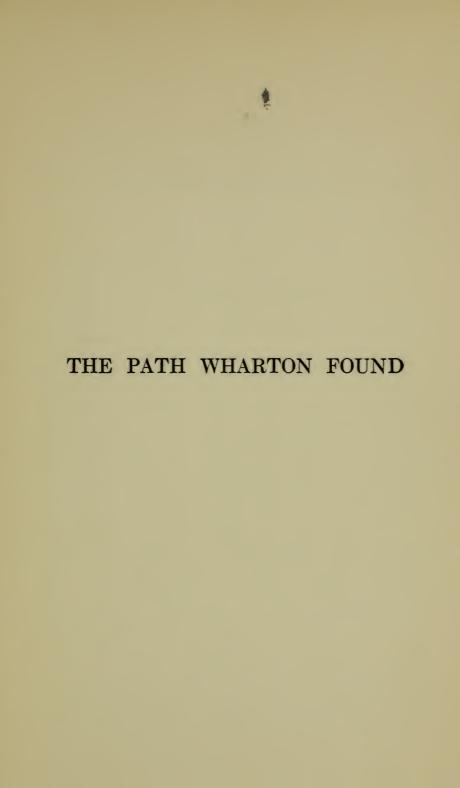
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CHAPTER I

Robert Wharton was famous at the age of thirty. It was not a universal fame. He was not annoyed by interviewers who wished to exploit him at the rate of five cents a word for the magazines. His portrait did not appear in the newspapers. People in distant lands were not aware of his existence. In his own land he was unknown to the millions who did not live in his native city. In his own city he rubbed elbows with thousands who did not know his name or his calling.

He was famous, nevertheless. One could not serve as pastor of St. John's church and remain obscure. It was a fashionable church for fashionable people. Membership conferred distinction.

When Robert Wharton began his career at one of the great Eastern universities, he had no thought of becoming a preacher.

He had no thought of becoming anything at all. He desired an education because all of the gentlemen of his family had acquired educations. One could not be a proper Wharton without university training.

He carried the burdens of scholarship lightly. He had the happy faculty of brushing aside unessentials and seizing upon the meat of a lecture or treatise, and he led his classes without apparent effort. He was not a grind. He found leisure to make the track team, and practiced boxing to such purpose that his junior year found him the undisputed champion of the university, with a defense that was almost uncanny and a wicked right hook that invariably ended the program for the day.

In the early winter of his last year at the university he discovered his possession of a voice. He had been trained from his boyhood to speak softly, as a gentleman and a Wharton should, and thus was long in ignorance of the treasure he possessed. When circumstance made him party to a debate he discovered, somewhat to his

astonishment, that his auditors were thrilled. The knowledge thrilled him in turn, and under the intoxication of his newly discovered power he put aside his notes and gave himself up to the delight of oratory. If he had known no earlier triumphs, this one might have turned his head, but one who has many blessings is seldom able to appreciate any of them, and the very abundance of his talents taught him modesty—or persuaded him to indifference, which is much the same thing.

It was his voice that called him into the ministry. He did not wish to be an idler. For a little while he dreamed of a political career, but a casual study of the methods of politicians convinced him that a Wharton could not play the game without some loss of his self-respect. In the end he decided in favor of the Church, crowded four years' work in two, and emerged a Doctor of Divinity and Philosophy in time to accept a call to St. John's.

His success was immediate. His sermons were logical and clever almost to the point of brilliance, but it is probable that his

voice would have insured success if his sermons had been drivel. With maturity had come a mellowness that had some of the quality of a violoncello—a mellowness that could be infinitely tender and sweet, and could on the instant ring like the echo of a deep-toned bell. Those who listened were soothed or stirred as by the strains of a celestial organ, and were persuaded to belief in the things the voice uttered.

Wharton made few friends. His profession and his voice set him apart. If he hungered at times for comradeship, he was forced to be content with deference—the penalty of greatness. He belonged to a club, and played golf with a few of the members of his church; but with the exception of his father, who seemed more chum than parent, he had but two intimates a boisterous, wealthy, perennially jovial young idler whom he had loved since their first meeting at the university, and a remarkably beautiful girl whom he had loved since their first meeting in an aisle of his church. These three comprised his world.

Life was desirable because these three lived, and the world was beautiful because of their presence.

He had won the girl without great effort, as he won all things without great effort, and the engagement had been announced. All of the things he desired were his, and his cup of happiness brimmed over.

And then, almost in a day, his world crumbled. His father lay down to sleep at night and did not awake again in this world. When news of the tragedy was brought to him he was not conscious of grief, but only of a great dullness that seemed to press him down and numb his mind. He stood beside the body and marveled alike at the peace and dignity of the white face and his own inability to comprehend the miracle that had taken life from it. He sought through his dulled mind to find among his philosophies an assurance that death was not terrible, and, finding no balm in them, turned at last to the text of his own sermons. He found no grain of comfort. All reasoning seemed trivial, futile, absurd. And for the first

time in his career as a preacher of the Gospel he began to realize that he did not believe and had never believed the things he preached. One blow had robbed him of his father and revealed the poverty of his faith.

A second blow followed quickly. A nervous and precise little lawyer called in person to deliver it. The Wharton fortune had dwindled until there remained no real property at all, and but a meager twenty-five thousand dollars in negotiable securities.

The third and final blow fell when he hastened to the home of his fiancée to acquaint her with the weight of the second.

He entered unannounced and stood dazed in the doorway leading to the library. His friend stood with his back to a fire that smoldered in the grate. In front of him, and held closely in his arms while her own encircled his neck, was the girl—the third and chiefest of Wharton's treasures.

The girl was the first to speak. She approached timidly and held out her hands. Wharton looked at them dully, but made no

move. He was incapable of movement. "Forgive me, Robert," she said brokenly. "I loved you both equally, and I could not bear to live in poverty. I meant to keep it from you until you had recovered a little from your grief. It is terribly cruel that you should learn of it now."

Wharton turned without a word and stumbled out of the room. He moved like one drugged, and his eyes stared straight ahead without seeing.

Five hours later, with his resignation written and mailed and his securities converted into currency, he boarded a limited train for the South and sank against the cushions, gnawed by griefs and shames and doubts and furies that tore at the root of all he had been and hoped to be.

CHAPTER II

At nine o'clock of an April morning, the town of Oakville lay asleep in the sunshine. Main street was deserted, save for two cheap cars parked on the shady side, and a number of hound dogs that lay asleep in the dust close to the curb. The quiet air was soundless, except for the drone of bees about the town pump, the musical clang of the blacksmith's hammer, and the cackle of hens in distant yards; and all out-of-doors was filled with the mingled scents of apple blossoms and lilacs and roses and new-plowed earth.

The Peoples Bank stood on a corner near the town pump, and along its south wall a dirt walk led to the post office. The post office was more than an institution; it was a trysting place, a public forum and a social center. Here the male population gathered each morning to await the distribution of the mail brought by the southbound train; here young men met their

sweethearts at appointed hours; here gossip was exchanged and the affairs of the world discussed. The walk that led to the post office was shaded by a wooden awning and offered hospitality to the weary and idle in the form of three cane-bottom chairs—chairs that leaned a little awry and bore the marks of many pocketknives. Usually these were occupied from early morning until twilight, but now two of them stood upright and empty. In the third, the least decrepit, there sat a giant of a man who nodded over his pipe or moved at intervals to disturb the flies that crawled upon his trousers. This was Augustus Cæsar Howard, known to all the community as Uncle Gus; a philosopher and a kindly critic.

There was a rumor, so long current as to have become legend, that Uncle Gus had a fortune of five thousand dollars earning eight per cent. in first mortgages. The size of his fortune may have been exaggerated, as such matters frequently are, but it was common knowledge that he paid his board bill promptly, and he had the benign and complacent air of one who has placed the

cares of this world behind him and has assurance of every creature comfort until the end.

He had an unflagging appetite for quiet leisure. When the weather was fine, he would sit in one of these chairs tilted against the wall of the bank building and exchange pleasantries with those who passed on their way to the post office. If undisturbed, he would nod a little, with his hat pulled over his eyes, but when his neighbors stood about waiting for their mail he was an oracle and an entertainer.

While in motion he appeared a little ungainly, for the trousers he bought out of stock to fit his generous waist hung loosely about his thin shanks and flapped idly as he walked. But when he was tilted back in a chair, with his feet caught on the lowest rung, his legs no longer appeared inadequate, and his paunch, now parked comfortably in his lap, seemed an appropriate foreground for one so firmly established in the respect of his fellows.

A stranger, passing by, might have remarked the unsupported socks that drooped

rather sadly over his shoe tops, and the unemployed second and third buttons that left his shirt bosom agape—might have seen in the filigree of blue veins with which his great nose was adorned some evidence of indiscretion in earlier years—conceivably might have been offended by the brown dots that adorned his shirt front and gave evidence alike of his fondness for tobacco in the plug state and gravity's conquest of muzzle velocity. But to his fellow townsmen these details were woven into the fabric of his personality, and without them he would have seemed a Samson shorn of his locks.

His opinions concerning neighborhood matters and the tangled affairs of the world were sage and well-considered, and were much sought by younger men who confined their reading to headlines. He enjoyed a good story and would applaud with a single thunderous "Haw!" that proclaimed his mirth and set in motion a series of mute subterranean chuckles. When he laughed thus silently within himself, with a gentle shaking of his great body, one was reminded

of a pot roast kept closely covered to retain the flavor that would be dissipated in the air except for this precaution. told a story well, also, but his greatest pleasure was to argue the Scriptures and demonstrate that this or that Hebrew patriarch was no better than he should have been. All of his serious thoughts concerned the destiny of man, and at intervals in his meditations concerning the ways of Providence, he would lift his voice in song drop his voice, rather; for his singing voice was a rumbling bass that rolled grandly up and down the street proclaiming to the world his satisfaction in "an old time religion that was good for Paul and Silas."

One cannot know whether his calm philosophy was a product of his religion or of the fortune of five thousand dollars invested in first mortgages; but his serenity was a rebuke to men and nations always shuddering in anticipation of earth's destruction, and those who were distressed by the way-wardness of their trivial affairs would stop for a little while in the untroubled atmosphere that surrounded him and go their way

rejuvenated, ashamed of their little courage and comforted in the faith that everything turns out all right.

The "nine-thirty" train drew into Oakville with a shriek and clamor that seemed a desecration, and discharged a single passenger, a trunk, and a Collie dog. This train brought no mail, and when the idlers who stood about had appraised the passenger and classified him as a traveling salesman, they drifted back up Main street and sought comfortable chairs or more democratic goods boxes inside the grocery stores. The passenger walked ahead of them. The briskness of his gait proclaimed him an alien. In all small towns there are men who hurry, but in nearly all cases their haste is not a product of necessity or ambition, but of temperament; and the temperament that urges them always to a more frenzied haste frequently makes them irritable and sharp of tongue, and thus deprives them of the increased rewards to which their energy entitles them.

The man who is trained in a metropolis hurries because his fellows hurry. Haste

is contagious like fear. It seldom brings a reward that could not be obtained in more leisurely fashion, and it develops into a habit that disqualifies one for the enjoyment of leisure.

The passenger walked briskly, as though in a great hurry to get somewhere, and yet it was apparent that he did not know where to go. He glanced to right and left, from sleeping hounds to the yawning doors of deserted stores, until at length his eyes fell upon the figure of Uncle Gus enthroned under the bank awning. He paused uncertainly and then stepped forward more slowly, his face lighted for a moment with a quick smile of amusement. The smile was gone when he stopped in the shade of the awning and said gravely: "I am a stranger here, sir. Will you be so kind as to direct me to a hotel or a private boarding house?"

The words were commonplace, but some quality in the low voice caused Uncle Gus to glance up quickly. His shrewd old eyes, peering beneath their shaggy brows, read and interpreted each detail of the stranger's bearing and form and clothing. Strangers

who desired private boarding houses were usually agents-men who sold sewing machines or maps, or enlarged pictures; but agents did not wear coats of such exquisite cut, nor did their voices contain that hint of expected deference. Clearly this man was a person of some consequence. His mouth was wide and generous, but there was a grimness about it that suggested habits of authority or temporary ill humor. His eyes contradicted and explained the grimness of his mouth. They were brown and friendly, and yet held a look of suffering-not physical suffering, obviously, for the man's skin was clear and his every movement suggested the athlete in perfect training. A city man, who possessed station and wealth, in quest of a boarding place. Uncle Gus was intrigued.

"Set down, brother," he invited, pushing forward one of the chairs. "Choosin' a boardin' house is a problem requirin' some discussion. The widow Hawkins takes boarders, but she puts too much grease in things, and if you're aimin' to stay here a spell her place won't do. No mortal stom-

ach could stand it. Amy Smith keeps boarders, too; I stay there, but she ain't got no use for dogs."

The stranger stooped a little to rub an ear of the tawny Collie, and then offered his hand. "I think I should introduce myself," he said. "I am Robert Wharton, and this is my friend Billy. If he were a man, I should hesitate to call him a friend, for one never knows; but dogs are gentlemen, and scorn dissimulation. We have planned to make our home here."

"Is that so?" exclaimed Uncle Gus, as he accepted the proffered hand and returned its hearty pressure. "Well, you're sure welcome. Your estimate of friends is agin you, but you're a good judge of dogs, and that counts somethin'. Goin' into business, maybe?"

"I hardly know," Wharton replied. have a little money, but my knowledge of merchandising is very limited. Perhaps something will suggest itself. My training has been largely academic."

"Huh," said Uncle Gus. "Schoolteacher?"

"A kind of teacher," said the other gravely.

"Lecturer, then," hazarded Uncle Gus.
"I thought I knowed that voice. Some lecturers has it."

Wharton flushed slightly. "A lecturer?" he asked. "Yes, you are right; that is what I have been. I talked of bubbles and made pretty phrases." His voice was suddenly hard and unpleasant. "I am through with that now, and shall make a new start. You were suggesting a place to board."

"So I was," conceded Uncle Gus dryly. "But meantime I was studyin' the boarder. We're country folks here, and has old-fashioned ways, but we're right hard to please in some things. We couldn't be hired to live nowhere else, because we've growed up in this place; but we're liable to be suspicious of a stranger that wants to live here." He held up a restraining hand. "No offense, brother. I'm just bein' frank. It's one o' my ways. You're a city man that's been up at the top, and if you want to come down here and live, why, you're welcome and no questions asked. Only, if

I was you, I'd decide right away what I was goin' to do, so as not to 'rouse too much curiosity, and I'd talk a little different."

Wharton laughed with genuine good humor. When he laughed he seemed much younger. "Whatever else I do," said he, "I shall cultivate your acquaintance. In what particular is my speech offensive?"

"It ain't offensive," said Uncle Gus. "It's right enjoyable. But it's book talk, and to folks that don't talk that way it sounds like puttin' on airs. We had a grocer here once who had taught school, and he talked that way. Looked like he spent all his spare time huntin' up words endin' in 'g,' so he could sound 'em. He talked so proper you couldn't tell what he was sayin' for listenin' to his grammar. And folks didn't like him. He made 'em feel inferior. Went busted after a while, all on account o' purty words. It's a purty good idea to talk like the folks you git your livin' from."

Wharton's eyes twinkled. "I reckon [18]

you're right, brother," he said, in perfect imitation of Uncle Gus' habitual drawl; "it don't pay none to put on airs."

Uncle Gus chuckled his appreciation. "You're all right, Wharton," he declared. "I'll answer for you, and what I say goes a long way in this town. You go on down to Cal Rogers' and tell him I sent you. He's a cotton buyer and lives in that big white house under the trees at the end of the street. They don't keep boarders much, but Ma Rogers is a cook by divine call and they'll treat you right. Come round and see me when you git settled."

Wharton recovered his bag, expressed his thanks, and set off with the Collie romping ahead. Uncle Gus looked after them and rubbed his chin in perplexity. "Danged good dog," he muttered; "and a danged good man, by the set of his shoulders. Trouble o' some kind. Funny how a man thinks he kin run away from trouble. Mostly it's in him, and goes right along. This boy wasn't in nothin' dirty. His eyes look too straight. Scandal o' some kind. Well, well; it's none o' my business, and

he'll make good company." His eyes narrowed, and he shook his head. "May be I done wrong," he mused. "He's a handsome rascal, and Cal's got a right purty gal."

CHAPTER III

The Rogers home, like many of its fellows, sat far back from the street in a grove of water oaks. Its green window blinds swung idle or dangled from broken hinges, and the white paint had blistered from its columns and weatherboarding. These signs of respectable decay were softened by a mass of rose vines that climbed vagrantly about the walls and flamed with bloom.

As Wharton approached the stone steps mounting to the porch, a lean hound dog got to its feet, voiced an alarmed protest and scurried about the corner of the house, stopping at a safe distance to bay furiously. Wharton knocked against the sagging screen door and stepped aside to await a reply. He heard quick steps in the dim hallway and then a querulous voice saying: "It ain't a bit o' use. I don't want to buy a thing, and you'll jest be wastin' your time." Then the screen was thrust open and a thin little woman with uprolled sleeves and

hands covered with flour peered at him above her spectacles.

"Excuse me," she said in a softer tone. "I thought you was a peddler. The only way to git shet of a peddler is to do it quick. Come right in and have a chair. I've been makin' bread and can't offer you a hand, but you're welcome. Set down till I call Pa."

She retreated hurriedly and he heard her calling from the back part of the house.

"Pa! O, Pa! The's a gentleman here to see you. Come right on. He's somebody. Don't leave that gate open. That old Dominique and her chicks will scratch up everything in the garden afore you can say scat."

There was a moment of silence, and then as a heavy foot stepped to the porch the voice continued in a lower tone: "I declare, Pa; you're a sight. Wash that dirt off your hands afore you go in. I'll fetch your coat."

A few minutes passed and then a screen door crashed and a portly and florid individual advanced down the hallway, dab-

bing at his flaming face with a pocket handkerchief.

"Howdy, stranger," he said affably. "Hot, ain't it?"

Wharton arose to accept the proffered hand, and at once explained his presence. "I was sent to you," he finished, "by an ancient philosopher who has a blue nose and sits in a cane-bottom chair to watch the world go by."

"That's Uncle Gus," said Rogers. "Fine man. Got lots o' sense. If he sent you, you're all right. Glad to have you with us. Let's set on the porch. I've been gardenin' a little, and I'm hot."

There were rough hickory rocking-chairs on the porch, each with a square of white linen tied against the back. Rogers chose one and motioned his guest to another. Once settled, with his feet reposing on the wooden banister, he produced a venerable cob pipe and began to fill it. Wharton felt in his pockets and found a blackened briar and accepted some of his host's tobacco. For a little time they smoked in silence. A breeze found its way under the low

branches of the water oaks, and aloft a mocking bird perched on some swaying twig and trilled his ever-changing melody.

"How peaceful and quiet it is here," Wharton said.

"I reckon it is," replied Rogers. "I don't notice it much, bein' used to it. It's always this way in the spring, when everybody is plowin,' but along in fall when business opens up the streets is crowded."

"The town depends on the farms, of course," Wharton suggested.

"Mostly," the other agreed. "I reckon all towns does. The farmer earns the money, and it looks like he ought to have it all; but us folks in town is right handy. The merchants, they handle things the farmer has to have, and o' course they make a profit. I buy his cotton when he gits it ginned, and o' course I git paid for that. Us town folks would starve if it wasn't for the farmer, but he'd be in a dickens of a fix if we wasn't here to wait on him. I remember last May an old feller named Garrett drove his Ford in to git some plowpoints and seen me on the street loafin'. Him and

me is always jokin' and goin' on, and I told him to hustle back and git to makin' a livin' for us town folks, and he says: 'Cal, I got a scrub Jersey cow that reminds me o' this here town. When pasture's good, she eats hearty and behaves herself; but when it's dry and the grass is tough, she sucks herself.' Then he looked up and down the street, where there wasn't nobody in sight, and he spit in the dust and says: 'Just suckin' itself.' I hadn't never thought of it that way before, but I reckon he's right."

Wharton smiled and ventured a question concerning the climate.

"It gits purty hot sometimes," Rogers confessed. "But it's always cool at night, and when it's close and stuffy in the day-time, we most generally git a shower to cool things off."

"What is the altitude here?" asked Wharton.

His host hesitated and looked a little perplexed.

"Why," he said at last, "it's mixed—Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian."

Wharton suppressed a smile.

"Are the churches well supported?" he asked.

"Purty well," Rogers replied. "Lots o' folks in town is tithers, and them that ain't gives liberal as a rule. You see, our churches are the only thing we have to git interested in much, exceptin' the school, and we take our religion purty serious. I don't mean we're better'n other folks, 'cause we ain't. I cuss a little sometimes, and maybe I'd take a little dram if I had a chance any more: but I belong to the church and try to be purty decent."

Wharton leaned forward to knock the ashes from his pipe. He found the frankness of these people a little embarrassing. In his own world men used words to suggest a thought, and left its completion to the hearer. They might speak frankly of politics or books or business, but they did not discuss their religions with strangers. He remembered, with something in the nature of a shock, that he had always considered a confession of sin a little vulgar, like the washing of soiled linen in public. Yet Rogers' matter-of-fact tone and the

simplicity of his confession, if confession it was, held a note of dignity that commanded his respect. To be "purty decent" was no mean accomplishment. It was a gentleman's code. He wondered, a little bitterly, if Rogers had found it sufficient, and was on the point of venturing a question when his attention was arrested by the sound of a merry whistle that came from the direction of the street. He looked up quickly and saw approaching through the trees the figure of a girl in white.

She held a gay parasol in one hand and whirled it in time with the lilting melody of her whistle. The sunlight, beating down through the branches above, glistened in the waves of her loosely piled hair—hair that was too dark to be red and too glorious to be brown; and even at that distance Wharton was aware that she possessed a complexion no art could duplicate.

Billy, the Collie, lifted his head at the sound of the whistle and cocked his perfect ears. Then some memory of another girl who had won his love brought him to his feet, and before Wharton could reach out

a restraining hand he was away with a flying leap and racing under the trees to make a new conquest. The girl halted at sight of him and knelt to offer eager arms. Then as she hugged him close she glanced up and met Wharton's eyes. Instantly she got to her feet, brushed the leaves from her dress, and approached the porch, smiling a greeting.

"This is my chap," said Rogers, with vast pride, as she drew near. "And this is Mr. Wharton, Nancy. He's our new boarder."

The girl offered a hand that was frankly cordial. "I covet your dog, Mr. Wharton," she said, "and you are doubly welcome because of him. Some day when Daddy has an attack of generosity I shall get one like him."

She spoke with a perceptible drawl and pronounced his name Whawton, but her choice of words, and above all her perfect self-possession, spoke of training in some less simple atmosphere. He had found no fault in the honest hospitality of her parents, but their manner had contained

something of deference that seemed to confess inferiority. The girl greeted him casually, as she would have greeted a new day. He was a guest—a very good-looking guest, to be sure—a fellow mortal, and the fortunate owner of a wonderful dog; no more.

Billy had followed the girl up the steps and stood nosing her hand until she began to rub his ears softly, whereupon he lifted his head with such a look of maudlin sentimentality that the flattered object of his devotion could not suppress the laugh that welled in her throat. Wharton was no less amused, though he may have had his own opinion of Billy's constancy; and his understanding laugh paved the way for an easy comradeship.

The girl had turned to enter the house, when Mrs. Rogers appeared at the hall door. "Pa," she said, "you take the gentleman up to his room. Nance, come out and finish settin' the table. The rolls is almost done, and they ain't fit to eat unless they're et hot."

CHAPTER IV

Culture is a product of money. The nobility is a division of society that has for many generations enjoyed the privilege of remaining idle and spending the money earned by those less fortunate. However logical they may seem, class distinctions were in the beginning wholly arbitrary.

A few unwashed knaves who are skilled in the art of slaughter win control of a state and levy taxes. By the judicious use of money and the gallows they consolidate their position and begin to grow great. Their superiority, for the time being, is wholly a matter of brute strength and purchasing power.

But as the years pass, the luxuries they are able to purchase bring them a certain refinement. Consciousness of power gives them a self-respect that operates as an obligation to live up to their station. They learn to wash themselves, and invent table manners. And their progeny, blessed with

luxury from the beginning, accept it as their just due and learn to think themselves creatures formed of superior clay. They are superior in fact—not by reason of the blood that is in them, but by reason of the luxuries, refinements and educational advantages money has brought them.

The lower classes remain low by reason of their poverty. Poverty and hardship in time break their spirit and rob them of hope and ambition, so that after a few generations they are content in the low station to which a hateful system has condemned them.

A true caste system cannot endure in America, for the simple reason that there is no fixed and accepted contrast between classes. One who washes windows will not bow and scrape before a millionaire, for he is filled with a hope that to-morrow will bring Opportunity to his door and set him on the way to make a million of his own. The wealthy, who constitute America's nearest approach to an upper class, cannot feel entirely secure in their position of superiority; for to-morrow may bring a

financial reverse that will reduce them to the middle class, or enrich the window washer and bring him clamoring at their doors with all the credentials necessary for admittance. Give wealth to any good American stock, and the second generation will attain a culture never excelled by a nobility founded on the sweat of peasants.

When a poor man becomes prosperous, his first desire is to surround himself with new comforts. His second is to educate his children and give them greater opportunities than were his. The result is that the children attain a degree of culture unknown to their parents and, to the casual observer, frequently seem bred of different stock.

This division of parents and children into "classes" marked the progress of Oakville from poverty to prosperity.

The town had grown from a crossroads store since the war between the North and South. Its builders were those who survived the war—all of them destitute, many of them illiterates of that class known in the day of the South's first prosperity as poor

whites. These did not dream of luxury. They were content to exist. And even when the healing processes of peace had begun to bring them a little prosperity, they were slow to recognize the advantages of education and slow to establish schools. Their children learned to read and write, perhaps, but few of them learned more.

Yet a little taste of learning and a larger taste of prosperity taught this second generation the value of culture, and it entered whole-heartedly into the business of building schools and supporting colleges. When its sons and daughters had finished the course of study provided by the local high school, they were sent to one of the state or denominational colleges, where they learned many things not printed in books. The young men returned home, for the most part, and began to learn merchandising in the establishments of their fathers or set up businesses of their own; and the girls returned to teach in the local schools, to clerk in the stores, to teach private classes in music, or to make excellent wives.

During his first week in Oakville, Wharton met many of the younger men and found them much like himself. could talk of books and men and great affairs, and were no less fastidious than himself in the matter of dress, but in one particular he found them much like their elders. They thought aloud. And they appeared to have no secrets. They discussed their private affairs frankly, as they discussed a government policy. Their hates and fears, ambitions and loves, losses and gains were legitimate topics of conversation, so that after a few days Wharton began to feel himself no longer an alien but a party to all that was Oakville. A guest cannot long hold aloof if he is accepted as one of the family.

The conversations in which he shared and those to which he listened led invariably to one conclusion. Wherever they began, and by whatsoever devious paths they wound about, they came at last to the subject of cotton and the fluctuations of the New York market; and after a time he began to understand that many of the

younger men and a few of their elders were playing the market through a broker at the county seat.

One morning he found Uncle Gus sitting alone under the bank awning and stopped to smoke a pipe and enjoy the old man's quaint philosophy. Uncle Gus seemed preoccupied and professed to be worried about Cal Rogers.

"Cal's monkeyin' with the cotton exchange," he explained.

"It seems to be a general failing," suggested Wharton.

"It sure is," replied Uncle Gus, "and it costs this town a sight o' money. I've been settin' here for ten years, ever since I moved in from the plantation, watchin' 'em. And nary one of 'em has made a nickel. I don't know nothin' about the market. Maybe it's crooked and maybe it ain't. Anyhow, our folks lose. You see, all of us depend on cotton for a livin', and it's natural for us to want cotton to go up. We git to wishin' it would go up, and then directly we git to believin' it will. That makes us what these stock market folks calls bulls. Most o' the

time bull is short for sucker. Well, these fellers that wants to git rich easy, they go to the county seat and buys a contract. They don't hardly ever sell. If they'd sell, they couldn't git rich unless cotton went down, and they ain't willin' to believe it can go down. So they buys, and when cotton goes down they put up margins, and finally they busts, maybe. Oncet in a while they make a little, but year in an'year out they waste a sight o' good money."

"Is Mr. Rogers in difficulty?" asked Wharton.

"He's about busted," replied Uncle Gus gloomily. "He bought a bunch o' contracts when cotton was up, and it's been goin' down for two weeks. Cal, he put up all he had, and finally he mortgaged his house. Folks know he's about a goner, and the' ain't nobody willin' to resk any money on him. Money's a little tight, anyway. They've give him till noon to put up his margins, an' if he can't make it, they'll close him out. It looks mighty bad for him."

Wharton thought fast. "Suppose he

had the money," said he. "Would this margin save him, or will the market drop farther?"

"Son," replied Uncle Gus, "if I knowed what the market would do, I'd be ridin' on rubber tires big as a nail keg. My opinion is, it's hit bottom. But I ain't no prophet. The' was a kind o' half fool lived here oncet, and he said he believed God knowed ever'thing except what the price o' cotton was goin' to do."

Wharton got to his feet.

"I'll go have a talk with Mr. Rogers," said he.

"Don't you do nothin' foolish," cautioned Uncle Gus. "Cal's a good feller, but this here is his funeral, not yourn."

Wharton found the Rogers family assembled in the hall. Evidently the head of the house had just warned his dependents of the impending calamity. Mrs. Rogers sat weeping into her apron, and Nancy knelt at her side making futile efforts to comfort her. Wharton stopped just inside the door.

"Forgive me for intruding," he said

hurriedly. "Uncle Gus told me something of your situation. Isn't there some way I can help you? How much money will you require?"

"Mr. Wharton," replied Rogers dully, "I got to put up ten thousand or go bust."

Wharton turned abruptly and raced up the stairway. His trunk sat near a window. He unlocked it quickly, lifted the lid, and revealed a neat pile of crisp new bills, banded in packets. He tore off the bands, counted out a number of bills into his hand, and turned again to the door, leaving the trunk open. When he returned to the group below, Rogers looked up hopefully and began slowly to get to his feet, his eyes wide and incredulous. Mrs. Rogers wept on, too deeply wrapped in misery to lift her head.

"Man," cried Rogers, "is that it?"

"Yes," said Wharton calmly; "here is what you need. It's all in large bills. You'll have to hurry, you know."

There was a scuffle of feet and the scrape of a chair behind them, and they turned

quickly. Mrs. Rogers had fainted. Wharton was at her side in an instant, giving directions as he placed her on her back and began to loosen her clothing. "Get some water, Rogers. Miss Nancy, get a silver flask from the till of my trunk. It's open. Quickly, please."

Nancy sped up the stairway and stooped above the trunk. Her eyes rested for a moment on the neat packets of currency, and then picked out a silver flask half hidden in a tangle of ties. As she picked it up, she saw on its plain surface the raised initials, "R. G.," and even in that moment of frenzied haste found time to reflect that "R. G." could not mean Robert Wharton.

When she returned with the flask, Mrs. Rogers was sitting up with her head pillowed on Wharton's knee and was smiling faintly.

"Sech a goose," she murmured. "Sech a goose. Never done sech a thing in my life." She strangled over the raw whiskey; but coughing did much to revive her and she was soon sitting in a chair, laughing

hysterically and calling down blessings on the head of Wharton.

"Well, sir," declared Rogers, "this here will sure stren'then my faith in prayer."

"Were you praying for money?" asked Wharton, a little amused.

"No sir," confessed Rogers, "but I sure ought to o' been."

Wharton laughed and pulled out his watch. "You have only forty minutes of grace," he suggested.

"That's all right," said Rogers. "The bank'll call 'em long distance and say they got the money. What's worryin' me is, how'm I goin' to make you safe. The bank's done got a mortgage on my place. Would a plain note be wo'th anything to you?"

"It isn't necessary," replied Wharton, smiling. "If you win, you will pay me; and if you lose, a note would be an unfortunate reminder of your inability to pay. I'll walk with you, if you don't mind. Mrs. Rogers will be all right now."

The two men left the house and Mrs. Rogers got to her feet a little unsteadily to

go about her neglected household duties. For the first time she noticed the flask in the girl's hand.

"Nance," she said, "where'd that flask come from?"

"It belongs to Mr. Wharton," the girl explained. "He sent me for it."

"Well," replied her mother, "it done me a sight o' good, and I didn't never thank him. I reckon the's enough more to thank him for now. You go put it up, and come fix some lemonade for dinner. Them men'll be back directly."

Nancy mounted the steps slowly, entered Wharton's room, and stood for several minutes before the open trunk, looking from the pile of crisp currency to the flask in her hand with its mysterious initials. At length she returned the flask to its proper place, closed the lid of the trunk, saw that the lock had caught and turned away with a very grave face.

She was a very matter-of-fact girl, and mysteries annoyed her.

CHAPTER V

Weak natures enjoy making a parade of their griefs. This is not the weakness of childhood. When a child playing alone falls and bruises a knee, it will get to its feet and continue its play without a whimper; but if an adult is near, to whom it can appeal for sympathy, it will fill the air with its cries and rush headlong to be comforted. This natural hunger for sympathy is shared by all mortals who are acquainted with grief, whether they be young or old. But those who are weak are not content with sympathy alone. All weak people are vain, and these, when they have suffered misfortune, turn it to account as a means of attracting attention. Their grief gives them a dignity and importance they had not otherwise known, and they capitalize these to feed their vanity. For a little season they have an opportunity to occupy the center of the stage, and they make the most of it.

Robert Wharton was not a weakling. Moreover, he had been schooled in the belief that one's private affairs should be kept to oneself. But if he did not air his griefs, he felt them no less keenly. He did not pity himself, as a lesser man might have done, but he felt that circumstance had used him hardly and he felt a sincere contempt for the world. He had trusted it and treated it fairly, and it had done him hurt; ergo, the world no longer deserved his respect.

He would not permit his mind to dwell upon his griefs. The chapter was closed; it was a man's part to forget. But the will to forget cannot at once efface a memory, and Wharton found it necessary to interest himself in a great number of trivial things in order to keep his mind from his sorrows. He did not read; for books offered no consolation, and newspapers threatened to remind him of the world he had left. But he forced himself to cultivate an interest in the lives and affairs of these people among whom he had cast his lot.

This interest was not genuine. It

was but a game he played to while away the heavy hours. He was incapable of feeling a genuine interest in anything. He was filled with a complete indifference. Whether the world wagged on or came at once to an end was all one with him. He gave no thought to the future. Each hour was sufficient to itself.

This morbid indifference explains the careless disposition made of his fortune. It had not occurred to him to place his money in a bank. If a thief made off with it, what matter? His treasures had been taken away; why be anxious concerning trash? It was indifference rather than generosity that prompted him to lend a portion of his money without security. True, his heart had been touched by another's extremity; but he had offered his money as casually as he might have tossed a coin to a beggar.

His indifference did not extend to his personal appearance—or rather, did not affect it. Habits of cleanliness become automatic. Our hearts may be broken, and yet mechanically we bathe and shave and

adjust our neckwear—following a routine without conscious effort while our burdened minds follow their mournful way.

At times Wharton's devils drove him afield. They would be lulled for a time by the conversation of his new-found friends on the street, or the whimsical chatter of Nancy as she sat with him on the cool porch at home, but after a little while they would have at him again and he would get to his feet and stride away with only a quick word of apology.

Billy was always at his heels or leaping ahead when he sought solace on the open road. Together they explored the patches of woods that filled the low places along the creek bottoms, chased rabbits that were started from clumps of grass in the meager pastures, and swam in the few pools the creeks afforded. Their tramps led them far, and invariably were continued until the devils were gone.

One morning when man and dog had ranged the fields for hours and returned, they stopped for a moment under the bank awning to rest. Uncle Gus sat in his accustomed place, relating an impossible yarn to a little group of idlers that stood about him. Wharton joined the group, standing with his back to the street, and Billy stretched at full length on the walk at his heels, so that one who passed that way must needs step over the dog or take to the dust of the street. Uncle Gus was nearing the point of his story, and Wharton was listening intently so that he was not aware of Billy's ill manners nor of the approach of of a lean, hard man who came that way.

This newcomer, younger of the Franks brothers, was of a type not unusual in small towns, and merits description. He was yet in his early thirties, but dissipation had lined his face and given his skin an unhealthy sallowness. His eyes were hard and his mouth cruel with that thin-lipped quality of sneering peculiar to men who have no conscientious scruple and will not hesitate to kill if there appears an occasion and opportunity to do murder without risking their own skins. He was a stock dealer and with his brother shipped mules from the West to sell to farmers about town.

He was full of great oaths—not decent expletives reserved for use under stress of anger or excitement, but a vile and gratuitously nasty store of profanity that rolled from his mouth in a continuous and filthy stream. Add to this the fact that the farmers with whom he dealt did not trust him, and the further fact that he had never known the love of a dog, and you have his character complete.

A whiter and wiser man would have stepped over Billy, but Franks was neither white nor wise. He paused just long enough to deliver a vicious kick to Billy's ribs, and took another step.

Things happened very quickly. Billy leaped away with a sharp yelp of surprise and pain, and Wharton whirled on his heel. His hand fell heavily on Franks' shoulder.

"What did you do?" he asked coldly.

"I kicked the damned brute out of my way," the other snarled. "Let go my shoulder, you ——" and he completed his sentence with that vilest of epithets man has invented.

Wharton's grip tightened.

"The dog is a thoroughbred," said he evenly. "He has never been shamed by contact with a cur until this moment."

Franks went suddenly white and jerked free. His right hand shot up in the direction of Wharton's face and stopped midway. His wrist was caught in a grip of steel, a grip that tightened inexorably and imparted a twist that brought a quick cry of pain to his lips. With a movement almost incredibly swift, his left hand sought his pocket and brought forth a knife. He opened the blade with his teeth and made a murderous slash at his adversary's throat. A snake does not strike more quickly; and those who stood about, white and breathless with excitement, gasped as men do when a death stroke has been delivered.

He struck swiftly, but he had to deal with one whose eyes and hands had been trained to instantaneous defense and attack. While the stroke was yet impending, Wharton's left hand had loosed the captured wrist and caught the hand that held the knife. With a quick backward step, he jerked Franks off his feet and in that same instant swung

his right arm. The blow came up from his knees and found its mark squarely in front of Franks' left ear. It was a shrewd and deadly blow, and Franks crumpled and sank to the walk in a heap.

Wharton opened and closed his hand and examined a bleeding knuckle ruefully. Then he looked up with a faint smile and said evenly: "I owe you gentlemen an apology for making a scene like this."

One of the bystanders laughed shortly. "You don't owe me nothin'," said he. "I wouldn't o' missed it for a dollar."

A few of the men worked rather anxiously with Franks until that discomfited warrior regained consciousness, and then half led and half carried him to a drug store about the corner. The others, perceiving that Wharton would not boast of his victory, followed the vanquished to hear his comments.

When they were gone, Uncle Gus sank into his chair, sighed deeply, and said: "Young man, you've kicked a hornet's nest. Mind you, I'm glad you done it; and you done it good. But them Franks brothers

is meaner'n snakes, and they won't let it drop here. They'll git you, most likely, lessen you're mighty keerful."

"It's very unfortunate," said Wharton quietly; "but I think I can take care of myself."

"You might whup 'em if they'd fight fair," Uncle Gus conceded. "But they don't know what fair means. They'll pick a quarrel when they're fixed for it. You watch out, I tell you. They'll kill you."

"Killing is rather serious business," Wharton suggested.

"It is for them that gits killed," Uncle Gus returned dryly. "But them boys has money enough to fight a case, and they'd git the right lawyer. The's a feller up here at the county seat that gits 'em all off. Rich feller, and smart as a briar. I reckon he's the cause o' most killin's in this section. If a feller wants to kill him a man, he knows he kin come clear if he gits this here lawyer. I don't know how come; maybe he hires the witnesses or fixes the juries. Anyhow, he always gits 'em off or gits a mistrial.

And you want to watch out. I've done told you, now."

Wharton got to his feet and snapped his fingers to Billy.

"I'll keep my eyes open," he promised. But it was apparent that he felt little anxiety, and as he walked away Uncle Gus shook his head dubiously.

"I can't make him out," he reflected.

"He's all man, and he's a fightin' son-of-agun. But how come he don't care nothin' about nothin'? Looks like he wouldn't lose no sleep over it if he did git killed. Men with right bad consciences is like that, sometimes, and men what's had their spirits broke."

He chuckled to himself. "If his spirit's broke, I'd o' liked to o' seed him when it was workin' good," said he.

CHAPTER VI

There was once a man who was ship-wrecked on an island in the southern seas. He was alone, except for the birds that nested in the cliffs and the cocoanut palms that fringed the shore. Eight months passed before a passing ship took him off, and it may be supposed that he found the days very long and dull. Dull they might have been, except for his interest in cocoanuts. The nuts were his chief article of diet, and during the eight months of his imprisonment he entertained himself by trying to decide how the milk got inside the shell.

Nancy was in similar case. Her environment offered no thrill, and thrust upon her the responsibility of providing her own entertainment. One of the compensations of small town life is that it forces one, in self-defense, to become independent.

In a metropolis, one who becomes bored with one's own society may at once discover

a variety of amusements and thus be enabled to forget self. The price he pays is that he comes to rely on amusements and loses the capacity to enjoy his own society.

If a child has many toys, its affection is divided among them until no particular toy seems to possess great value. It depends upon toys for its happiness, and yet loses interest in each new toy when it has ceased to be a novelty. A child with no toys, being thrown upon its own resources, makes a castle of a chair and a dragon of a piece of string, and finds never-failing joy in the resources of its own imagination. To live happily in a small town one must be self-reliant.

Nancy read much, as did the other young people of the town, and frequent tennis matches and boisterous lawn parties afforded an outlet for her energy; but she had many hours to herself, and did a great deal of solid thinking. She was not imaginative, and built few air castles; and though much of her thinking was speculative, she seldom cast herself in the rôle of heroine.

It was this habit of thinking as a means

of entertainment that kept her mind for many days on the contents of Wharton's trunk. She knew the value of a dollar and respected its purchasing power. When she went shopping, she inspected fabrics closely and got prices from several shops before making a purchase. When a clerk displayed a waist or skirt to tempt her, she would examine the garment and ask the price, and then she would return it and say: "I can buy the goods and make it for half of that."

That anyone should be guilty of such unappreciative and stupid negligence as to leave a fortune in a flimsy trunk was wholly incomprehensible. Oakville people were honest, and doors were seldom locked at night, but few homes contained portable valuables worthy a burglar's attention. To keep a fortune in a trunk was to offer gratuitous temptation and invite a merited disaster. A folly so unprecedented could have but one logical explanation, and it was an explanation Nancy was loath to accept. One who had stolen money or come by it in another dishonorable manner might hesitate to place it in a bank.

Nancy did not believe Wharton guilty of theft. She felt a sincere and whole-hearted gratitude for the service he had done her family, and her natural impulse was to endow him with all the virtues. We are all by nature hero worshipers, and are especially prone to worship those heroes by whose activities we profit. She could not bring herself to think evil of this stranger whose generosity had saved her home, but her practical mind could not reconcile itself to the thought of an honest fortune lying unprotected in a trunk.

She was sitting on the front porch shelling peas, and alternately accusing and defending Wharton, when the sound of approaching steps caused her to look up and she saw the object of her thoughts approaching through the trees with Billy.

She flushed a little guiltily and would have dropped her eyes had not some new quality in Wharton's bearing arrested her attention. His usual stride was that free and well-poised swing peculiar to those who run or walk much, and there was always a hint of pride in the sway of his shoulders;

but now she observed a quality that could only be described as a swagger; and as Wharton drew nearer she saw that his eyes were no longer somber, but shining as though some smoldering inner fire had kindled and blazed.

Wharton was, in fact, experiencing a rare exhilaration. During his university days he had fought many hard battles, but these had been in a spirit of play. He had now, for the first time in his life, struck a blow in anger. To avenge a hurt done his one friend, and to defend his own honor and life, he had whipped a fellow man thoroughly and scientifically, and the consciousness of victory in a cause so worthy thrilled him as no other triumph in his life had done. He felt himself a primitive. He gloried in the fact of physical conquest. And the intoxication of that primitive reaction brought him in closer touch and sympathy with his fellow men than he had ever been before.

As he mounted the steps to the porch, Nancy smiled up into his face and said: "Your bearing suggests the need of a triumphal arch."

Because he was for the moment a primitive, he noticed for the first time that she had remarkably fine teeth and that her smile coaxed the most elusive and most bewitching of dimples to her left cheek.

"Do I suggest the fanfare of trumpets

and things like that?" he asked.

"You do, indeed," said she; "not to mention slaves trotting in long manacled rows behind your chariot, and elephants bearing loot."

He laughed and reached for a chair to draw it nearer. Her eyes followed him, and rested for a moment on his bleeding knuckles. She drew in a quick breath.

"So you really have been fighting," she charged.

"I'm afraid so," he confessed, with something very like a grin. "And somehow I can't feel very repentant."

"You weren't hurt?" she asked, in a tone that confessed more than she knew.

"Only my hand," he answered cheerfully. "His head was mostly bone."

She laughed a little tremulously and was on the point of questioning him further when her father appeared from the street, breathless from haste and excitement, and seized Wharton's bruised hand in both his own.

"Just now heard it," he cried. "Good job. Glad you done it."

He turned to Nancy. "Mr. Wharton's whipped hell out o' Slim Franks for kickin' his dog," he exulted.

"Daddy," she protested, "stop swearing."

"Scuse me, Nance. I forgot. And any-how, he done it." He turned to Wharton. "Let's see your hand," he commanded. "Now," he went on, "let's go in and git somethin' on that. It ain't hurt much, but bein' raw like that it might git pizened. Wouldn't su'prise me none if Slim's head was pizen, anyway."

The two men entered the house, Wharton protesting that his hurt was trivial, and Nancy resumed the shelling of peas. Her eyes were shining, and she had the feeling that she had rubbed elbows with romance. She no longer thought of the money in the trunk, or of the silver flask with initials

that did not fit in. These matters had lost significance. She was suddenly conscious, with a strange and illogical exultation, that this man who was a guest in her home could do no wrong. If he chose to throw his money in the street, the street would at once become the only reasonable and practicable site for the storing of money. If he chose to have in his possession silver flasks bearing all the letters of the alphabet, his whim would be a sufficient justification of itself.

How fine that he should have fought for his dog! Other men had fought for other dogs, and others still will fight for dogs while dogs and men dwell together, but this was epic! This was knighthood! And Miss Nancy shelled peas very fast, and was conscious of burning cheeks that proclaimed to the world the completion of a miracle that is as old as the race and yet ever new and wonderful.

One who is skilled in the art of thinking will have some experience of introspection. He will not deceive himself. Nancy did not wonder what had happened to her, nor

take counsel of maidenly modesty and strive to trick her reason. She knew that some power greater than herself had taken away her liberty of action and made her for all time, come good or ill fortune, the partisan and champion of a man who had said no word of love.

If she was thus honest with herself, it did not follow that she was under an obligation to be as honest with the world. She loved Wharton, and the knowledge of her love filled her with an inexpressible joy. She yearned to shout it from the house tops. And yet, so strange is the innate modesty of maidens, wild horses could not have dragged the secret from her. The love in her heart would remain hidden there until and unless her idol came down from the pedestal on which she had placed him and begged for the favor she was so eager to bestow.

When the family had assembled at the dinner table, Nancy's demeanor gave no hint of the jubilation in her heart. She addressed Wharton in the same friendly and bantering tone she had employed from

the beginning of their acquaintance; called him a warrior or a Don Quixote; and laughed merrily at his whimsical answers to her father's persistent questions. Rogers hungered for details of the battle; he applauded and magnified each aggressive movement Wharton had made; he thirsted for gore; and he insisted that his failure to witness the fray would remain the one great disappointment of his life.

As the dinner drew to an end, Rogers became suddenly grave and turned to Wharton with a warning.

"You want to watch out for a spell, Mr. Wharton. That Slim Franks is a terrible wicked man. Like as not he'll try to kill you, or somethin'."

Neither of the men was looking at Nancy. Perhaps they would not have understood in any case. At her father's words she paled a little, and her knife rattled into her plate. She looked up quickly and caught he mother's eyes upon her. Her own eyes made a confession no mother could fail to understand.

Mrs. Rogers glanced quickly away and

began to talk of other matters. The loyalty of woman's pride to woman's pride would keep her lips sealed. Until her daughter chose to speak, she would pretend not to have seen the confession in her eyes.

CHAPTER VII

The Franks stable was headquarters for all that was undesirable in Oakville. Here the vicious congregated to pass the hours with salacious and witless stories; here the negro bootleggers found a haven and a market place; here a few young men met to gamble; here a few older men foregathered to drink and to lie sodden in the stalls until sleep had cleared their wits and given them mastery of their legs. Here, through all the seasons of the year, was unclean talk and gratuitous profanity; here a vile phrase in ridicule of decency was met with loud guffaws; here was nastiness without relief or shame or adulteration; and here the Franks brothers were the high priests of a clan that loved hell for its own sake.

Oakville's one policeman, a man named Wilson, spent the greater portion of his waking hours at the stable. He did not frequent the stable to discourage evil doers;

his motive was wholly selfish. He was a lean and lazy renegade of an earlier generation, and held his place chiefly because no other citizen would accept it at the salary the town could afford to pay. He was a bully by instinct and training, and when he had occasion to arrest an offending negro or a white man who was not of his own clan, he used his club freely and rattled off great oaths to inspire terror in the hearts of his victims. He made frequent reference to his uncontrollable temper, and would discourse for hours upon the subject of his valor.

He coveted a reputation as a dangerous man. The Franks brothers were his heroes and his models. He sat at their feet to learn profanity, and laughed loyally at their sallies. They were what he wished to be, and since he knew himself at heart a coward and believed them to be without fear of man or devil, he deferred to them in all matters and depended upon them for his opinions. They called him Chief.

On the morning following the encounter between the younger Franks and Wharton,

the Franks brothers sat in the stable office and communed with Wilson, their satellite. A bottle passed between them, and each, when he had drunk, coughed or gagged, and presently, having recovered his breath, expressed the profane conviction that it was "purty good licker."

The younger brother drank deepest, for he had a bitter and humiliating memory to efface. He had been beaten to the ground by an outlander, and shamed before the world; and his rage was made the greater by the knowledge that his familiars placed small credence in his version of the battle.

"He hit me with knucks," he repeated for the twentieth time. "That's what he done. Hit me with knucks when I wasn't lookin'." And he added a string of oaths to make his assertion more convincing.

"How come his knuckles busted, then?" demanded the elder Franks, who was known to the community as Bull.

"I don't know nothin' about that," returned Slim. "All I know is, they ain't no livin' man kin knock me cold with his fists an' me lookin' at him. I kin hog-tie that

dressed up, prissy talkin' Yankee with one hand. That's what I kin. And they ain't no man kin hit me like he done and live. No, sir; I'll cut his throat so wide they won't be nothing left to hold his head on except his collar button. I'm a fire eater and a hell raiser, I am. I'll kill him the first time—" He broke off with an oath and got unsteadily to his feet. "No, sir; I ain't goin' to wait. I'm goin' to hunt him up. I'm goin' to rip him open. I'm goin' to spill his innards on the ground and tromp on 'em." He lurched towards the door.

Bull reached forth a ponderous hand and jerked the warrior back to his chair.

"You're goin' to set down," he growled. "If you can't lick him sober, how you goin' to lick him drunk? We got to lick that feller and lick him good, but we ain't goin' off half-cocked. I ain't never been licked in my life, but I depends mostly on my teeth. When I fastens one, he hollers calf rope. I kin lick this feller if I can git clost enough, but he's right handy with his fists and I ain't takin' no chances. We got to fix up a way to git him."

"I kin arrest him for fightin'," suggested Wilson.

"Yes, and that means arrestin' Slim, too. Slim ain't got no money to waste on fines, with licker ten dollars a quart. You let 'em be. I'll fix up somethin'."

"I'll cut his heart out," volunteered Slim. "Won't I, Chief?"

"You sure will," Wilson agreed.

"And his liver," Slim continued, much encouraged.

"Sure you will."

"And I'll rip up his stomick." Slims' liquor was beginning to work, and he was interested in anatomy. "I had a cow oncet that was a hooker, and one day she made a pass at me and I gouged my thumb in her eye. I sure did. It bust right out. I'll bet a dollar I kin gouge this feller's eyes out the first crack. I'd gouge 'em out and then I'd say, 'Now,' I'd say, 'how you goin' to see now?' I'd say. Wouldn't that be a good one?"

He laughed uproariously, and the others joined him. Wilson's mirth was uncontrollable. He slapped his knees and rocked

in his chair, and still his merriment grew, until at length he slipped to the floor and rolled about, twisting and kicking in the paroxysms of his glee. When his mirth had exhausted itself, he got to his feet and stooped to recover a card that had fallen from his pocket.

"Let's see that," demanded Bull Franks. It was one of those cards sent abroad under one cent postage by police departments, and bore a portrait of one who was wanted by the law for the theft of a great sum from a metropolitan bank. The criminal, it appeared, had been a trusted employé of the institution, and had made off with a bag full of currency. Display type offered a reward for his capture, and smaller type offered one of those vague descriptions that seem to fit most of one's acquaintances. Bull Franks studied the card closely.

"This here picture," he said at length, "is too old, and the eyes is too close, and the chin is kind o' scairt lookin'. But I reckon it'll do."

"Do for what?" asked Wilson.

"To throw a scare in this here Wharton."

"But it ain't Wharton."

"I know it ain't. But now look here. Who is this Wharton and where'd he come from? Nobody knows. He don't talk none. If a man don't talk none about hisself, he's got a reason for not talkin'. What's a feller like him doin' in a little town like this, huh? He's hidin', that's what he's doin'. He's done somethin'. And a feller that's done somethin' and is hidin', he's scairt o' law. He don't want no truck with police. We'll put the fear o' God in him."

"We can't," Wilson objected.

"Why can't we?"

"Well, he'd fight, maybe."

"You ain't scairt, are you?"

"I ain't scairt o' nothin'. But if I goes to arrest him, he wants to know how come. And then I shows this here card, and any fool knows it ain't him. I'd have this here whole town pokin' fun at me."

"You don't show no card," Bull explained. "All you got to do is keep your mouth shet and keep that card hid. I'll

do the talkin', and I'll say I seen the card. Then folks asks you about it, and you says you left the card at home."

"Folks won't believe you. They like this feller."

"Trouble with you is, you ain't got no sense. They ain't nobody popular with everybody. This Wharton is got some folks so they eat out of his hand, but the's others ain't got no use for him. He talks too purty to suit 'em, and he dresses up too much. They think he is stuck on hisself, which he most likely is. Well, these folks that don't like him, they're just waitin' for somethin'. All I got to do is start this here story and say I seen the card, and then these folks keeps it goin'. Like as not, most of 'em will say they seen the card."

"It might work, maybe."

"It can't help workin'. Folks is always glad to believe scandal. It's excitin'. And when they find out this bank feller ain't Wharton, they'll kind o' be in the habit o' suspicionin' him, and they'll begin to ask where he come from and why he come.

He'll leave town between two days, that's what he'll do."

"If he does that, you won't git to beat him up."

"That's all right, too. I ain't pinin' to beat him. All I want is to git him. He ain't done me no dirt, 'cept to lick Slim; and Slim hadn't ought to o' kicked that dog, no way."

The younger Franks had lost interest in the conversation and had slouched in his chair with his chin on his breast. At the sound of his name he straightened, focused his eyes with obvious effort, and began to amplify his former remarks.

"I'll—hic—his liver out," he declared

solemnly.

"You're drunk," said Bull. "You're drunker'n a biled owl. If I couldn't tote my licker any better'n you do, I wouldn't drink none."

Slim tipped his hat over his eyes ferociously and essayed to rise. He was unequal to the effort and sank again into his chair.

"I'll have you un'erstan'," he said with

great dignity, "I'll have you un'erstan' I'm gen'man. I ain't drunk. I'm jus' feelin' good. Tha's matter with me. I'm feelin' good."

He blinked solemnly, hiccoughed, and gave way to wrath.

"You're fine brother, tha's what you are. Thish feller lick hell out o' me, an' you shay I'm drunk. Tha's it. Tha's what you do. Only brother I got says I'm drunk. Got licked an' then I'm drunk. Been brother to you for hun'erd years, and tha's what I git. Tha's gratitude. Tha's takin' lil' brother's part."

The recital of his wrongs overcame him and he began to weep.

Bull Franks reached for the bottle and held it to the light. "He's done drunk it up," he mourned. "Now ain't that hell? My licker's dyin' out, and I got to have another drink. What about you?"

"I could stand some," Wilson agreed. Slim spoke through his tears.

"I kin stand lil' drink," he murmured dreamily.

"Huh," said Bull; "you can't even stand

up. You got a cryin' drunk, and next thing you'll be sick at your stomick." He turned to Wilson. "Let's lock him in here to sleep it off and find some licker."

He stepped to the door and called lustily: "Shine! You, Shine, come here."

A very black negro boy, wearing a broad smile and a pair of tattered overalls, appeared from the back of the stable.

"Got any licker?" demanded Bull.

"Naw, sah; but Ah knows whereat some is?"

"Is it good licker?"

"It's cawn, sah. Ah ain't never tasted it, but de boy what's got it, he say it sho' got a kick lak a mule."

Bull peeled a bill from a fat roll.

"Shake a leg," he commanded.

The boy disappeared and presently returned with a pint bottle inside his shirt. Bull removed the corncob stopper and sniffed doubtfully.

"Boy, you sure this is good licker?"

"De boy Ah got it fum, he say it is." He grinned broadly. "Ifen you is willin', Ah samples it and sees will it kill a nigger."

"Huh," said Bull; "can't waste highpriced licker experimentin'."

He tilted the bottle and drank greedily. When he lowered it, but a third of the contents remained. He handed the bottle to Wilson.

"Mean as hell," he growled, when he could breathe again. "Kill the rest of it, and let's finish plannin'. Boy, git out."

He sat down on a sack of oats, lit a cigarette, and began to work out the details of the scheme that would make an end of Wharton.

CHAPTER VIII

The south-bound train had gone its way, and a boy who worked about the station was approaching the post office with a cart laden with sacks of morning mail. Clerks along the street were sweeping off the sidewalks in front of the stores, and a few early risers were standing about the post office door.

For the greater number of Oakville citizens, the whistle of the morning train was reveille. When the train was late, they lay late abed. The train was made up at the county seat, however, and was seldom able to lose a great deal of time in the eighteen-mile run.

Those who lay abed until awakened by the whistle of the "seven-forty" made short work of morning toilet and breakfast. Custom had imposed an obligation to keep an appointment with other citizens in the post office lobby, and they did not wish to be late.

There had been a time, in the early history of the post office, when letters were considered of paramount importance, and accordingly were distributed first. But many patrons of the office subscribed for daily newspapers, and being eager to learn what a day had brought forth in the world, urged the postmaster to lay the letters aside and give newspapers the right of way. Once established, this custom had endured through the years.

When the daily papers began to appear in the boxes, patrons seized them eagerly and scanned the headlines. If the headlines told of some calamity or other matter of unusual interest, some one who enjoyed the sound of his own voice would begin to read the story aloud for the benefit of those who did not receive daily newspapers, and all would gather about him to listen. Some, who had newspapers of their own, were offended by this practice, and would step outside the post office and lean against the wall to do their reading.

When the newspapers had been distributed and the letters began to appear,

those who had lock boxes would remove each letter as it was placed in the box, glance through it hastily, and again take up the burden of conversation. Presently mail matter bearing one cent postage would begin to appear, and some man who had business elsewhere would call through the partition to ask if the letters were distributed and the postmaster would call back cheerily: "All up." Then those who stood about would drift away, singly or in groups.

Those who received mail having no value would crumple or tear it and toss it to the edge of the sidewalk. One of the postmaster's duties consisted in sweeping this cast-off mail into a pile each morning and making a bonfire of it. He was an accommodating and well-loved public servant, and interpreted duty as a willingness to do the thing that was desired of him. If a breathless patron appeared at the general delivery window after an approaching train had whistled for the station, and demanded a stamp for a letter that could not wait for another mail, the postmaster

would lock his office and run down the alley to mail the letter on the train.

This morning the patrons began to gather as usual, and long before the distribution of the letters was begun the lobby was comfortably filled. Late comers stood about on the walk in front. Among these was Bull Franks. He talked freely, but his talk was denatured. It contained none of the profanity that he was wont to use so freely about his own premises. Ladies never assembled with the men at the post office, but frequently the teachers stopped on their way to school to mail letters, and there was an unwritten law that profanity should not be tolerated.

Presently Bull entered the lobby and returned to the walk with his daily newspaper. He glanced over the headlines, with their grisly tale of crimes that men consider news, and remarked casually to no one in particular: "I see the's been another killin'. Looks like they ain't nothin' in the papers no more but pieces about folks raisin' Cain. I don't know what the country's comin' to. Looks like everybody's

gittin' crooked. And that reminds me. I seen a card the Chief had yisterday, offerin' a reward for a feller what cleaned out a bank up North. Nice lookin' feller, too. Got a whole bag full o' money. I'll bet they don't git him."

"Was his picture on the card?" asked a bystander.

"Yes, sir; natural as life."

"Then how come they won't git him?"

"Well, he'll slip off to some little town like this here and keep quiet, and they won't nobody suspicion him."

Cal Rogers stood leaning against an awning post at the outer edge of the group about Bull Franks. His eyes were on his newspaper, and he did not appear to listen, for he did not love the Franks brothers; but Bull's voice carried far and Cal could not avoid hearing.

"If I saw the card and later saw the man," boasted a young business man, "I have no doubt I should recognize him. Business is a little dull, and a reward would come in handy."

"What kind o' lookin' chap was he, Bull?" asked another.

This was the question Bull had invited, and his nostrils dilated a little with triumph. He did not answer at once. He had played poker too long to risk weakening his position by a show of eagerness. Assertiveness invites antagonism, and a hasty condemnation defeats its own ends by making partisans of fair men who are neutral. Bull wished to appear wholly disinterested.

"Nice lookin' chap," he answered presently. "Somethin' kind o' familiar about him, too. Looks a little like this feller Wharton."

Rogers stared hard at his newspaper. He felt inquiring eyes turned in his direction, but kept his poise. He understood Bull's plan and purpose, and he felt an urge to defend the man who slept under his roof. But a second thought warned him that argument would only serve to make bad matters worse. After all, he knew little concerning Wharton. In appearance and speech the man was a decent gentleman; but a thief might look and talk

as well. And a thief might keep quantities of fresh currency in his room and lend it freely without security. Easy come, easy go. Rogers began to be very uncomfortable. It was his nature and practice to believe all people honest, but, like all people who have little or no acquaintance with books, he was suspicious of things he did not understand and a suspicion dwelt upon quickly became conviction. He discounted the charge Bull was so adroitly making, but he could not persuade himself that Bull was entirely without justification. longed to get away and have a talk with Wharton. He could not endure the thought that he had saved his own fortune from wreck by accepting stolen money from a generous thief. He must know at once whether his house had been dishonored, but he could not pull himself away until he had heard the end of Bull's charge.

"It couldn't be Wharton," the young business man spoke up quickly. "Wharton is all right. He's white all through."

Others echoed this opinion, and Bull raised a protesting hand.

"I ain't accusin' him o' nothin'; I just said this picture looks like him, which it does. I never spoke to Wharton in my life. I suppose you folks know where he come from and what he's doin' here."

He glanced from one to another and laughed shortly.

"Do you?" he asked.

The young business man flushed slightly. "I don't," he confessed. "But I don't suspicion every stranger who has the appearance of a gentleman."

It was Bull's turn to color, but he kept his temper.

"I don't neither," said he. "And I ain't goin' to start no argument. But since you got this thing goin', I'd kind o' like to know how many folks here knows anything about this feller."

The men in the group looked at one another and shook their heads. Some, who had learned to like Wharton and now felt powerless to defend him, turned angrily away. A few, who were of Bull's clan or kind, pressed him for further particulars, but he would say no more. He had accom-

plished his purpose, and he knew that wherever men gathered together throughout the day they would discuss Wharton and wonder that none knew anything of his history. He knew that the matter would come quickly to Wharton's ears, and he was convinced that another day would find this outlander on his way to parts unknown.

The little wooden doors of the general delivery window clicked open to announce the distribution of the last piece of mail, and soon the lobby was deserted.

Rogers folded his newspaper and thrust it into his pocket, and without a glance in the direction of Bull Franks strode away. He knew that he must see Wharton quickly, and he had several necessary pieces of business to accomplish before he could feel free to question his guest.

As Bull Franks turned away from the post office he was hailed by Uncle Gus, who sat in his accustomed place and pulled placidly at his battered cob pipe.

"Set down, Bull."

"I got a little business to see after," Bull objected, "and I ain't got no time."

"You got time enough," said Uncle Gus dryly. "What's this scandal you're startin' on Wharton?"

"I ain't startin' nothin'," declared Bull.
"I just mentioned seein' this card, and folks go to talkin' about Wharton. He's all right, fur as I know."

"He is," said Uncle Gus, "but you ain't."

"What you blessin' me out for?" demanded Bull. "I ain't done you no harm."

"Yes you have. I git kind o' sensitive as I grow older, and it does me a right smart o' harm just to have you livin' in the same world. You're sneakin', Bull. Wharton, he licked Slim fair and square. I seed him do it. That's what's eatin' on you now. You can't fool me none. I know your breed, and I knowed your Pa 'fore you was born. You ain't got the guts to stand up to Wharton, and so you go knifin' him in the back. It won't do, Bull. I won't have it."

"You can't bluff me none," Bull flared angrily. "Settin' there like a old frog to scare folks. You got this here town under

your thumb, maybe; but you don't look like God A'mighty to me. I run my own business, and I don't take orders from no man."

Uncle Gus tapped his pipe against a chair round and prepared to refill it. "Son," said he mildly, "this town is full o' fine folks, 'cept for nine. The nine that ain't fine folks spends their time at your stable. Chief Wilson is one of 'em. An' you know just as well as I do that your playhouse gits busted up when I says the word. I kin git Wilson fired and git a real man in his place in a hour. Only reason I ain't done nothin' 'fore now is because you fellers kind o' stew in your own fat round there at the stable. This here arrangement gives hell a sort o' headquarters in town, and keeps the scum out o' the way o' decent folks. If we had a sure 'nough police, your gang would be in the guardhouse most o' the time. Maybe you'd be with 'em, I d'know. Leastwise they wouldn't be no niggers totin' rot-gut licker for you. ain't aimin' to do you no harm, Bull. keep hopin' somethin' will happen to make

you fellers decent. I might could git you in jail, but that ain't what I'm wantin'. I'm wantin' to see you straighten up and be somebody."

"I'd just as soon not hear no preachin'," growled Bull.

"Well, you ain't hopeless yit," Uncle Gus returned dryly. "A good case o' religion wouldn't do you no harm. I'll be fair with you, Bull; I'd like danged well to see you git right. But it don't make no difference what you do, you're a goin' to keep your mouth shet about Wharton."

He smoked for a time in silence.

"Did that picture favor Wharton?" he asked abruptly.

"Not much," said Bull sullenly.

"Where is it at?"

"Chief's got it."

"Well, you hunt him up and tell him I want it. Tell him he needn't mind losin' it or burnin' it, unless he's aimin' to retire from the cares o' public duty and work for a livin'. That's all, Bull."

Bull Franks walked away, and Uncle Gus resumed his pipe. Presently he

knocked the ashes from the bowl, folded his hands across his great paunch, and began to hum his favorite song. Gradually the humming grew louder and took on the form of words, and then his great voice swelled to a thunderous chorus:

It's the old time religion;
It's the old time religion;
It's the old time religion,
An' it's good enough for me.

It makes you love your next door neighbor; Makes you love your next door neighbor; Makes you love your next door neighbor, An' it's good enough for me.

In the stores up and down the street men exchanged glances and smiled, and agreed that Uncle Gus must be feeling rather well this morning.

CHAPTER IX

Cal Rogers habitually carried his troubles to his wife. He did not ask advice, and she seldom offered it; but she was an excellent listener and that, perhaps, was all that he desired. Many men who think they consult their wives merely use them as an audience while they think aloud. If a man endeavors to think aloud in solitude, the sound of his voice will distract his attention and break his train of thought. But if he has a sympathetic wife to listen, he may reason himself out of a difficulty and meanwhile enjoy the sound of his voice and the feeling that he is making a very good impression.

An inexperienced wife may be tempted to break into a husband's rambling monologue to express her opinions, and thus, while endeavoring to be helpful, become in fact a hindrance; but a wife who knows her business will hold her peace and continue her mending, listening at times

and at times dreaming of her own affairs. She may feel no interest in the things her husband is saying; she need not affect an interest. All that he asks of her is silence; all that he desires is an opportunity to think aloud without being made to feel ridiculous for want of an audience.

Cal believed that his wife's interest in their mutual affairs was equal to his own, and he believed that he consulted her. It was his habit, when faced by the necessity of making a decision, to ask for a little time and say: "I'll have to talk to Ma about it and see what she says." And later, when he had talked at rather than to his wife, he would feel strengthened by the conviction that they two had thrashed the matter out and reached a unanimous opinion.

For her part, Mrs. Rogers was content to be a foil. She had implicit faith in Cal's judgment. During the first year of their marriage, Cal had one day called her to the back porch to ask her advice concerning the location of a well. "Lulu," he had said, "where do you want this well dug? I'm a goin' to dig it right here." Since that day

she had grown accustomed to these consultations, and learned to be content in the rôle that was required of her.

When Cal strode away from the post office, filled with rage against Bull Franks and an inconsistent fear that he had harbored and profited by a thief, he hungered for the moral support of his wife's sympathy. He found her in the garden, picking turnip greens for dinner, and called her to the gate.

"Let me git these greens on first," she pleaded.

"It can't wait, Ma," he replied gloomily. "Somethin' bad has happened. Come and set down on the wash bench, and let's talk it over."

Mrs. Rogers hurried from the garden, with the greens clutched tight in her apron, and dropped limply to the bench. Her eyes were wide and her face white with fear.

"Cotton ain't gone down again, Cal?" she demanded in an agonized voice.

"No, Ma; it ain't that. Cotton's up, so I kin close out them contracts and not lose

ary nickel. I kin pay Wharton and git shet of him."

"Why, Pa! What's wrong with Mr. Wharton?"

"I don't know," he answered dejectedly; "but I got to find out. Chief Wilson's got a card from up North offerin' a reward for a feller what stole a whole passel o' money from a bank. His picture is on the card, and Bull Franks says it looks like him."

"Bull Franks!" Mrs. Rogers sniffed. "Bull Franks ain't never been accused o' tellin' the truth, and he'd say anything dirty he could think of to git even with Mr. Wharton for lickin' Slim."

"It ain't only Bull, Ma. Chief's got the card to show for itself."

"Huh! Chief Wilson ain't no better'n Bull Franks. When Bull lies, the Chief swears to it."

Mrs. Rogers was frankly a partisan. Loyalty to her child demanded equal loyalty to those her child might love. Since Nancy loved Wharton, Wharton could do no wrong. She would fight to protect his good name as she would fight to protect Nancy's.

Cal shook his head stubbornly.

"It ain't only them, Ma. Ever'body at the post office was talkin' about it. And they wasn't anybody there that knowed anything about Wharton or where he come from. We don't know, Ma."

"Who all seen the card?"

"Nobody but them two, fur as I know." Mrs. Rogers breathed a sigh of relief.

"There now," she exclaimed. "Ain't that plain enough? You know Bull Franks hates Wharton, 'count o' Slim, and you know him and Chief Wilson is thick as three in a bed. If that was a picture o' Mr. Wharton, which it ain't, don't you know Bull would o' had it and been showin' it? That Bull Franks is the sorriest white man livin'."

"He ain't no sorrier'n Slim. Both is as low down as a snake's belly. But that ain't neither here nor there, Ma. I'm scared about Wharton."

"You ain't got no call to be scared, Pa. Mr. Wharton is jest the same as he was yisterday, afore that Bull Franks got to spreadin' scandal."

"I know. But how come he ain't never told us where he come from?"

"Well, I ain't never told him where I come from. Do you reckon he thinks I'm a thief jest 'cause I ain't never told him I was raised down here in Possum Kingdom?"

Cal held out his hands with a gesture of despair.

"How come you so sot on defendin' Wharton all at oncet?" he demanded.

Mrs. Rogers flushed. "He needs it all at oncet," she said. "And what's more, if I got to choose 'twixt him and Bull Franks, I ain't a goin' to be long choosin'. And what's more yit, he done us a favor and it don't become us to run him down."

"I reckon you're right, Ma. But, jest the same, I ain't a goin' to be beholden' to him any longer than I kin help. I'm a goin' to close out them contracts and give his money back, and then I'm a goin' to find out about him."

"Don't you go hurtin' his feelin's, Pa," she cautioned.

"You needn't fret. I'll jest pick at him and git him to talkin'. If he ain't got

nothin' to hide, he'll answer plain questions."

He got to his feet and turned for a last word.

"I like him jest as well as you do, Ma; but we can't afford to take chances. If he's a bank thief, like Bull says, we don't want his money. And even if he's honest, I better close out them contracts and pay him while I got a chance. Cotton ain't a goin' to stay up forever."

The sound of their voices in animated discussion had attracted Nancy, who was weeding a flower bed at the dining room window, and she had drawn near in time to hear the end of the conversation. She stepped back softly until she gained the corner of the house, and then turned and ran to the front porch. She had a service to perform.

It is often said by those whose hearts have known no master that love may die—that one may love devotedly, and presently, having discovered some fault in the object of one's worship, cast out love and efface the memory of it. There was never a

greater absurdity. When man experiences a great passion, whether love or hate or fear, and surrenders to it for a season, it engraves itself upon his mind so indelibly that time cannot take it away. Circumstance may remove the cause of his fear, but he will fear the same thing still; and often in his dreams he will awake with a cry of alarm because the menace has returned to assail him in his sleep. Circumstance may remove the cause of his hate, or time may dull the edge of it; but it will remain to trouble his sleep, and the least provocation will make it again his master. Love endures forever. There are natures incapable of a great passion, and the fancy of these may flit from one object to another, as a butterfly moves from flower to flower; but those who love deeply love always. If it does not endure, it is not love.

When Nancy gave her heart unasked, she gave without reservation. If Fate had denied her the love she craved, she would have loved none the less. If the passing days had revealed Wharton as a thief, she would have turned her back upon him to

save her honor and her pride, and she would have despised her weakness and concealed her hurt from the world, but through all her days she would have loved him still.

She did not stop to weigh the evidence against Wharton. She did not know the whole of the charge against him. The charge did not matter. Already she had acquitted him in her heart. She knew him to be incapable of theft. And yet her love prompted an anxiety that was but little removed from suspicion, and it was this anxiety that gave her courage for an act that otherwise would have been immeasurably distasteful.

She entered the house quietly and as quietly mounted the stairs to the second floor. At the door of Wharton's room she hesitated and looked about furtively as one will who is bent on mischief. An hour earlier she had entered his room to make up his bed, but now that she no longer had a legitimate errand she was afraid.

There is in each of us a native dread of wrongdoing, and of the appearance of wrongdoing, that causes us to slink when

we are conscious of guilt and thus proclaim our unworthiness before the world. The evil that men do advertises itself in their manner, so that the criminal frequently is tricked and undone by the consciousness of being a criminal.

The room was in all respects as Nancy had left it. She crossed quickly to the trunk and tried the lid. It was unlocked, and she breathed a quick sigh of relief. She raised the lid without hesitation and felt among the ties to find the silver flask. Her search was rewarded quickly and she got to her feet. As she reached for the trunk lid to close it, the thought occurred to her that the packets of currency might require no less of explanation than the initials on the flask, but she could not bring herself to touch the money. She could take away the flask, and feel that she had rendered a service; but to take away the money would give her a feeling of guilt, and the possession of it would fill her with anxious and unreasoning fear.

While she stood hesitating, a step

sounded in the hallway. She closed the trunk quickly and whirled to face the door, the flask held tightly to her breast. She was frightened as she never had been frightened before, and for the moment she had lost the ability to move or speak. She could but stare wide-eyed at the door and await disaster.

The door opened quickly, and Wharton stood on the threshold.

He drew back at once. "I beg your pardon," said he. "I didn't mean to intrude." Then as he became aware of Nancy's white face and the flask in her hands, he took a quick step forward.

"Is your mother ill again?" he asked anxiously.

Nancy put out her hands as though to keep him away.

"Oh," she moaned; "please let me go." Instead he advanced and placed his hands on her shoulders. He was puzzled and a little alarmed.

"What is the trouble, Miss Nancy?" he asked kindly. "Perhaps I can help you."

Nancy wished to explain, but she feared to offend him; and her scattered wits could offer no relief except in the prospect of flight. She endeavored to pull away from his restraining hands, and when he but held her the tighter she bowed her head and began to weep softly.

Wharton released her at once and stood dumfounded.

"Miss Nancy," he begged, "tell me what is the matter."

For answer she wept the more and incontinently fled.

He stood looking after her for a moment, and then turned back to the empty room, annoyed, discomfited, and wholly ill at ease.

Nancy reached the haven of her own room and flung herself on the bed to weep away her shame. Her behavior had been worse than suspicious; it had been absurd; and her face flamed at the memory of it. She felt that she had forfeited Wharton's good opinion as she had forfeited her own, and in the first anguish of her shame she felt sure that she would never again have

the courage to hold up her head in his presence.

Wharton joined the family at dinner. He was conscious of an unfamiliar quality of restraint in the conversation of Rogers and his wife, and their labored effort to make their remarks casual only served to make the situation more painful. Nancy did not appear, and there was no reference to her absence. Wharton ate little. He felt that something disagreeable impended, and waited uneasily for some word that would suggest its nature.

When the meal was finished, he left the table with Rogers and walked to the front porch for his usual after-dinner smoke.

"Mr. Wharton," said Rogers tensely, "don't you walk out to that patch o' pines on the east road right frequent?"

"Every day," said Wharton.

"Well, let's me and you both walk out there now. I want to talk things over, and I want to be where nobody won't bother us."

CHAPTER X

Wharton and Rogers set off along a country road. A rain had fallen during the night to pack the dust, and the pastures in the rolling landscape were brilliant checkers of green in the midst of the newly plowed fields. Here and there lone apple trees stood upon the terraces thrown up to save the fields from the ravages of summer rains, and the air was heavy with the fragrance of their blossoms. Mocking birds sang in the tree tops, and from every wooded hollow came the mournful note of doves.

To Rogers the scene was commonplace. He estimated the brown fields in terms of cotton. In a vague, uninterested way he was conscious of beauty about him, but familiarity had robbed him of the capacity to enjoy it.

To Wharton the scene suggested the peace of a benediction, and yet there was in it some quality of loneliness and sadness

that weighed upon him and served to depress his spirit.

Perhaps he would have felt a similar depression in any case. The unfeigned and unstudied hospitality of the Rogers home, wherein he had been made to feel a member of the family, had persuaded him to put aside the reserve that formerly had protected his independence, and become as one of them. While one holds aloof one experiences no rebuffs; it is only the relaxation of unguarded fellowship that leaves one without defense against thoughtless words and unkind acts. Wharton had relaxed in a kindly atmosphere that was without constraint or dissimulation, and the relaxation had made him susceptible to hurt when the family chose to exclude him from its confidence.

Nancy's conduct had seemed to reproach and accuse him, and the subsequent behavior of her parents, while affording no enlightenment, had served to confirm the fear that he had in some manner given offense.

His first reaction, the product of his new-

found humility and appreciation of fellowship, was one of very real concern; but presently his long-established pride asserted itself. After all, what had he to do with these people? They were not of his world. They were simple, primitive, a little uncouth. He would pay his board and lodging and play the rôle of an outlander. If they did not find him to their liking, they need only say the word to be quit of him. There were other homes, other towns.

The thought of being an outlander brought small comfort. He had acquaintance with but two worlds—that one of reserve and cultured pose and intellectual insincerity he had left to find balm for his wounds, and this new world with its disarming frankness and simple contentment. If he turned his back upon the new, he was at once at the mercy of the old. Already his devils began to assail him.

The loss of his father he could now accept with philosophic calm; the unfaithfulness of the girl and the friend had furnished its own balm, for pride would not long permit

him to grieve for those who had proven themselves unworthy of his affection.

We seldom torture our minds with the thought of another's faults. If fault keeps us awake at night and steals away the pleasure of our days, it is our own. It was conscience, more than loss, that troubled Wharton. And, oddly enough, his conscience did not concern itself with the matter of religion. He did not chide himself for laying down the work he had begun. He did not admit that his want of belief in the things he had preached was in itself an offense. He was shamed and tormented because he had assumed a rôle that was not sincere and thus violated the nice standards that prescribe the conduct of a proper gentleman.

And even this he might have forgiven himself except for the utter poverty of his present faith. If a man without sincerity has done a thing that is in itself virtuous, the virtue of the act may remove the sting of his insincerity; but if without sincerity he serves in a cause that is itself absurd, he is doubly shamed. He will feel a buffoon,

and the hurt to his dignity will leave him no shred of self-respect.

Wharton felt that he disbelieved. As a matter of fact, he merely doubted; and between these two is a wide gulf. When a man doubts, he but tempts himself to further study; when he disbelieves, he closes the door to further knowledge. Wharton's love for the man who had been his comrade and father would not permit him to believe that the dead are but dust in a vault; nor would his love of logic permit him to believe without reservation in the truth of a thing that could not be demonstrated. With all of him that was emotion he wished to believe; with all of him that was reason he contrived to doubt.

Filled with his own thoughts and utterly oblivious to his companion, he strode along the highway at a pace that brought him quickly to the edge of the pine wood. Then, for the first time, he remembered his fellow traveler and turned in quick contrition to make apology.

"I am afraid I have walked too fast for you," he said ruefully.

He had, indeed. Rogers was breathing hard, and rivers of perspiration crept from under his hatband and lined his face. His normally florid countenance flamed the red of brick, and his low collar had wilted and settled in dejected folds.

"Purty lively clip for a fat man," he agreed. "Done me good, maybe. Sweatin' ain't never fatal. Gosh, it feels good under the trees. Let's find a log somewhere and set down."

Wharton led the way to a fallen pine that lay in a little hollow in the midst of the wood. The pine needles were deep under foot, and violets covered each hummock the needles had left bare. This spot Wharton had made his own. Here he kept a rendezvous with his devils, and here he dreamed and steeped his soul in contentment when the devils left him in peace.

Rogers broke off a small limb and began to whittle. He could talk better with a knife in his hand. Billy, whose love for the wood was equal to Wharton's, walked away to go adventuring among the trees.

"I'm afraid you'll think it's quare,"

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Rogers began with some embarrassment, "me gittin' you off here in the woods. But I felt like I jest had to talk to you about things that ain't none o' my business, and I didn't want nobody interferin'."

"That is all right," returned Wharton. "I enjoy the walk and the wood, and I have no doubt I shall enjoy the talk as well. You need not hesitate to speak what is in your mind, for I am not easily offended."

"Well, first off," Rogers began, "there's that money you lent me. I called up the exchange this mornin' and told 'em to close out them contracts. I'll get a check in the mornin' and kin square off with you. You've done me a big favor, and I sure appreciate it like sixty."

"It was a little thing," said Wharton. "I was glad to have an opportunity to repay your hospitality, and I shall feel disappointed if you took a loss in order to repay me."

"No, I never lost nothin'. I'm out now, and I reckon I'll stay out. It's too resky. An' that brings me to one thing I was drivin' at. Ain't you takin' a big chance,

leavin' money in a trunk? How come you don't put it in a bank?"

"I suppose I should," replied Wharton.
"Frankly, I had given the matter no thought. There were other things to occupy my mind, and the money seemed of small value. I shall place it in the bank if you wish."

"I wish you would. Nance, she saw all them bills stacked there when you sont her to git the licker for her ma, and she told us about it. None of us ain't said nothin', but it's worried us right sharply. Somethin' might happen, maybe; and we'd be to blame, it bein' in our house. We'll feel a sight easier if the money's in the bank."

Rogers felt that he was making little progress. Wharton's ready acceptance of his suggestion had convinced him that the money was honestly come by, but he felt the need of something more tangible to still the tongue of gossip.

"If it's a fair question," he continued, "how come you totin' round so much big money?"

"A very natural question. The money was my inheritance. My father died very suddenly, and my little world seemed to crumble. I wished to get away quickly, and I had not yet selected a destination. My one desire was to sever all ties with the world I had known, and I packed the money in my trunk along with other possessions and gave no thought to its value. It was an essential, as my toothbrush and razor were essentials. It was absurd, perhaps; but I was not in a frame of mind to value trinkets."

Rogers stirred the needles at his feet and shook his head in bewilderment.

"You must o' thought a sight o' your pa," said he. "I'm right sorry about him dyin' that-a-way." He hesitated in some confusion, and then continued: "Mr. Wharton, I ain't aimin' to pry into your affairs, but I got a reason for askin'. I knowed when I first seen you, you was somebody biggity. Wasn't you somethin' or other up there?"

Instead of answering, Wharton turned to face his questioner squarely. He began

to suspect that Rogers' interest was inspired by doubt of his boarder's good character.

"Mr. Rogers, I fear you are not entirely frank. I have no secrets, and if you will tell me what it is you wish to know I shall be glad to answer your questions. Has something occurred to cost me your good opinion?"

"Now, now," said Rogers hurriedly, "don't you go jumpin' at conclusions, as the feller says. I ain't doubtin' you none whatever. You done me a favor, and I'll fight for you. But the's been loose talk by a hound dog named Bull Franks, a brother to the feller you licked, and us folks what likes you ain't got nothin' to answer back with. I'm jest huntin' ammunition, that's what I'm doin', and I ain't meanin' no offense."

Rogers vehemence was sufficient proof of his sincerity, and Wharton at once dismissed his suspicions.

"What is the burden of this 'hound's' loose talk?" he asked, smiling.

"Well," replied Rogers, much relieved and conscious of having carried the matter [110]

off very well, "he says for one thing that nobody knows what you was afore you come here."

"I was a preacher," replied Wharton calmly.

"A preacher! Well, I'll be danged. It must o' been a biggity church."

"St. John's in New Walden; it is a fashionable church," replied Wharton a little bitterly.

"Huh, I've hearn tell of 'em. An' you was so upsot you quit when your pa died?"

"When my father died I was bitter. I tried to believe that he lived in some other and better world inhabited by the spirits of those who are just and clean, but my reason denied me this consolation. He was but a dead body, and my loss was complete and final. I realized that I had been a play actor—that my belief in a resurrection had been no more than a fondness for the poetic. The reality of death had transformed a pleasant fairy tale into a bitter mockery. And so," he finished simply, "I resigned and came away."

"I declare now, that's too bad," ex-

claimed Rogers. "When a man loses faith, he ain't got much left. Don't you reckon you'll be all right when you sort o' git over the shock?"

"I had no genuine faith in the beginning."

"Wasn't you never converted?"

"No."

"Man alive! Then how come you preachin'?"

Wharton flushed. "It was a very despicable thing," he said gravely. "I did not realize the enormity of my offense."

"Well, you probably didn't do them folks no harm; but that ain't sayin' you didn't do yourself none. When a feller gits to makin' out he's got religion when he ain't, it's a lot harder to git a real case." He shook his head gloomily. "I sure wish you could git right,' he concluded.

Wharton got to his feet. He did not wish to be lectured.

"Shall we be getting back?" he suggested.

The return journey was made at a slower pace. Rogers was not without tact, and made no further reference to the matter of

religion. He had found an alibi for his friend, and that was a sufficient victory for one day. The reaction from anxiety loosed his tongue, and he talked incessantly. He told of his ignominious part in the little scene before the post office, and boasted of the things he would say to his fellow townsmen and to Bull Franks in particular.

"If it is possible," Wharton interrupted, "I should much prefer remaining incognito."

"In what?"

"If people should learn that I was once a preacher, they might not understand. They might even find some new cause to suspect me."

"That's right, sure enough. Anyhow, I kin tell 'em where you come from, and them what ain't satisfied kin find out for their-selves. Bull won't talk no more; thieves don't tell folks where they come from."

"Thieves? Am I supposed to be a thief?"

"Bull said he seen a card offerin' a reward for a bank thief, and the picture favored you."

Wharton walked on in silence, reviewing the events of the morning. He could now understand the awkward silences and the pitiable efforts to make conversation that had stolen away three appetites at dinner; and he wondered, with a pang that was in part wounded pride, if a fourth had remained away to avoid breaking bread with a felon. His face flushed with resentment. If the ugly rumor had come to Nancy's ears, as doubtless it had, that might explain her absence from the dinner table; but could it explain her consternation and utter lack of poise when he had found her in his room? Her errand there was not legitimate; she had come for a flask of spirits; perhaps her panic had been occasioned by a sense of guilt. But no; she was too well-bred to trespass without a sufficient reason, and too well-poised to lose her wits without a sufficient cause.

Presently the somber look left his eyes and they began to twinkle right merrily. He had remembered the alien initials with which the flask was adorned, and had found an explanation of Nancy's conduct

more in keeping with the little he had learned of her character.

The two men approached the Rogers home from the side and thus came upon Nancy unawares. She was sitting in one of the hickory rockers on the porch, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, staring with unseeing eyes at the trees on the lawn. As the men approached she got to her feet in pretty confusion and turned to enter the house.

"Please don't go, Miss Nancy," said Wharton. "I have something to say to you."

"Yes, you set out here, Nance," chimed in Rogers. "I got somethin' to tell your ma private."

When they were alone, Wharton turned a grave face to the girl and in a voice that belied the merry twinkle in his eyes, said: "Miss Nancy, I learn that I have been suspected of grand larceny and breach of trust and similar wicked pastimes; and now, having established an alibi for myself and thus earned the right to question the conduct of others, I should like to ask where

you were when a certain silver flask was taken from my room this morning."

Nancy flushed scarlet. "Please, Mr. Wharton," she begged.

He was serious at once.

"Miss Nancy," said he, "I have to thank you for a kind and generous act. You had heard me charged with theft, and you hastened to remove the one piece of evidence that would require considerable explaining." He laughed. "I traded a signet ring for that flask when I was a bold, bad freshman. That explains the initials. Robert Wharton isn't my latest alias; but you meant to be kind and I am indebted to you." He paused, and when she did not reply, continued: "That was your reason for taking it, wasn't it?"

Nancy feared to lift her eyes. "I didn't believe a word of that story," she declared. "But I was afraid Chief Wilson would search your room, and you had done so much for us."

Wharton laughed. "It was a fine thing to do," he declared, "and I admire your quick wit. If you ever have a crime to

conceal, don't fail to command my services."

He offered his hand, and she took it hesitatingly, still without meeting his eyes. Sensing that she had not yet recovered her poise, he excused himself and went to his room for a shower.

When he was gone, Nancy smiled to herself. "How good he is," she marveled, "and how goodness encourages modesty. If I had done as much for any other man, he would have suspected me of being in love with him."

Wharton entertained no conscious thought of conquest made or in prospect. But he lathered under the needle shower mechanically, while his mind busied itself with a tribute to young ladies who are loyal and courageous and adorable and—well, almost red headed.

CHAPTER XI

All days in Oakville were quiet, and in this particular Sunday differed little from the others; yet there was some quality in the air—some spirit of reverence—some consciousness of a peace more profound that made the day unique.

A youthful wit, possessed of the cynicism of youth, had once sensed that nameless quality in the air and ventured the opinion that the Sunday morning pious feeling was in fact a clean feeling resulting from the Saturday night bath.

Perhaps there was some wisdom in his folly. Man is ever at his best when he is clean, and mental filth thrives most luxuriantly where physical filth is tolerated. Without self-respect and a decent pride, man will not aspire to communion with Heaven; and except he be washed he will not cultivate self-respect and a decent pride. Soap is the handmaiden of civilization; a bath the half of culture.

Unlike other days, Sunday did not begin with the passing of the 7.40 train. The train came and went unheeded, while the town lay abed; and for another hour the cackling hens and crowing cocks and singing birds had the morning to themselves. Then the smoke of breakfast fires began to ascend from the chimneys, and the mellow bells began their rival calls to Sunday school.

Breakfast eaten, fathers in two hundred homes began with brush and paste to polish children's shoes; while mothers, made a little irritable by the need of haste, gave the last pat to hair ribbons and sashes, inspected finger nails, and distributed Sunday school papers and pennies.

When the children were got off there was a leisurely hour in which the parents might prepare for worship. Wives brought forth the white shirts and freshly pressed black suits their husbands reserved for Sunday wear, and turned at last to their own toilets.

From scented chests and closet hooks they gathered their little store of finery—

the silk stockings wisely saved for great occasions, the hand-worked lingerie, the gowns imported from the metropolis or cut from a pattern and made with greater care by their own skillful fingers. A final approving glance at the mirror, a touch of powder, a last inspection of the roast in the oven, and they were ready. One duty remained. The choicest roses and lilacs and hyacinths must be gathered into vases to place at the foot of the pulpit.

Wharton's first Sunday in Oakville had been spent with Billy and his own unpleasant thoughts. His host had invited him to attend church, but he had excused himself and gone his solitary way to find peace in the hills. The second Sunday found him accepted as a member of the family, and thus constrained by courtesy to respect the family's customs.

He was constrained as well by some new quality of tenderness and sympathy that revealed itself in the manner and speech of those about him. Rogers had brought from the pine wood a romantic story made of fact and his own imagination. His

faith and his experience had taught him to respect preachers more than other men; and Wharton, who had been not only a preacher but pastor of one of the most widely known churches in the land, he at once endowed with all the qualities of greatness. He could not measure or understand the depth of Wharton's love for his father, for his own father had been a tyrant and a stranger; nor could he understand the anguish Wharton had endured when death revealed the poverty of his faith. But he possessed a native appreciation of the dramatic, and he saw in Wharton's resignation from a great church and his descent to troubled idleness in a village the grandeur of a Homeric gesture. It was as though an eagle had been content to surrender the freedom of mountain top and cloud and take up its abode in a hencoop; or a king had put aside his royal robes to become a peasant. This thought Rogers enlarged upon when he told the tale to his wife and to Nancy, and yet he made clear his conviction that the eagle would return to the mountain top and the king to his throne.

"He hadn't never been converted, Ma," he concluded; "he jest took up preachin' like a feller takes up horseshoein'. That's what's wrong with him now. Maybe that's how come the Lord to take his pa away, so he'd see he didn't have no faith and git started right. He's cut out for a preacher, and I bet he gits converted and goes back to them big churches. He's a big man, Ma. He's like a prince, or congressman, or somethin'. We sure ought to be proud to have him a-stayin' here."

Mrs. Rogers shared this feeling of pride. She, also, classed preachers among the great of the earth. But if Wharton was a prince, he was a prince who had suffered and was now in need of mothering. She would honor him as he deserved, and pray that he might find a way to peace, but meanwhile she would give him the sympathy he so sorely needed.

Nancy's reaction was more intimate. To her there was nothing new or strange in the story of Wharton's greatness. Her heart had enthroned him as the greatest of earth, the one good and perfect man; and

neither priesthood nor high place could magnify his virtues. Because he had lost one whom he held dear, she longed to comfort him and offer her love as a substitute for that he had lost; and yet, so quickly does love give itself proprietary rights and seek to make its object more adorable by molding it nearer to the heart's desire, she longed most of all to be the influence that would lead him from his wandering in dark places to the unquestioning faith that had been hers since childhood.

So each felt a new and more tender interest in Wharton because of the suffering he had known and the great way he had yet to travel in quest of peace; and each, although unconsciously, translated this interest into affection and proclaimed it in every act and spoken word.

Wharton's heart responded as a plant to the wooing of summer rains. All kindness is prompted by affection, and the love that prompts kindness is at once the least employed and the most puissant influence among men. Kindness will enslave men. An enemy may fight valiantly against

hate's weapons and accept a mortal hurt with eyes yet flashing defiance, but kindness will crumble his defenses and strike the weapon from his hand. This is not sentimentalism, but a statement of psychological fact. Temper invariably inspires temper; hate invariably kindles hatred; loving kindness invariably defeats both temper and hate.

It frequently happens that people endeavor to humiliate an enemy by a process they describe as pouring coals of fire on his head. Their kindness is affected; their real desire and purpose is to give a demonstration of their moral superiority and hurt him by inviting a comparison of his perversity and their own faultless virtue. Affected kindness accomplishes no good; rather it serves to widen a breach, for it unavoidably advertises its hypocrisy and gives offense.

Wharton had known much of respect and deference, but with the exception of his father none had given him unfeigned and unrestrained affection. All men, whatever their station or temperament or train-

ing, wish to be loved. All men soften and relax and put aside their reserve and suspicion in an atmosphere of love. And the affection and sympathetic concern that now enveloped Wharton overcame the last of his resistance and persuaded him to relax as completely as a man will after a hard and vexatious day when night brings him at last to the security and privacy of home and the comfort of his easy-chair.

As he sat on the porch after breakfast to enjoy his pipe, some nameless pathos in the music of the bells filled him with a passion of loneliness and a hunger for fellowship. He spoke to Billy, who lay on the porch beside his chair, and extended a hand to receive the dog's caress. Billy was a loyal friend who was worthy of his love and loved him in return, but Billy could not satisfy the hunger inspired by the bells. The bells called to Wharton insistently, almost in yearning, and yet he knew that he had no part in them. They invited and yet shut him out. They tortured him. He felt like one who stands aside to watch

guests go by on their way to a feast, and, while knowing himself welcome with them, is yet held back by some perversity of his nature and made to hunger the more by the knowledge that others are more fortunate than himself.

Nancy appeared at the door and crossed to Wharton's chair. She sat on her heels beside Billy and began playfully to worry his ears, whispering nonsense the while and flattering him with adjectives. Wharton watched her dully, his mind yet on the bells, and looking up she surprised the look of hurt and hunger in his eyes.

"Mr. Wharton," she said quickly, "won't you go to church with me this morning?"

"I'll be very glad to, Miss Nancy," he answered. "The bells have been inviting me, but I thought I detected in their voice some note of insincerity."

Thus it was that Wharton came to attend his first church service in Oakville. Nancy delayed her toilet until her parents had grown tired of waiting and had gone their way, and then rejoined Wharton on the porch.

"You mustn't expect too much of our old preacher," said she. "He isn't an orator, and I think he has long since forgotten that schools teach theology; but kindness has been his creed and his doctrine for so many, many years that when his sweet old wrinkled face lights up with a smile, I feel as though he had placed his hand on my head and blessed me."

They walked on slowly, stopping at times to pay tribute to flower beds or bury their faces in the masses of roses that ran riot on the pickets, and as slowly mounted the church steps.

People do not walk fast on their way to church. Though they be ever so late, they keep the same unhurried pace. They will step briskly on their way to dinner, the theater or a ball game, but when their minds are bent on worship they appear to borrow something of dignity from their purpose. A ball game and a play are soon ended; their brevity invites consideration of time. But to one whose thoughts dwell on God, haste seems an absurdity; the thought of Deity suggests the slow

march of the centuries, the gradual unfurling of eternity; and a consciousness of impotence combines with an innate sense of proportion to calm one's spirit to match the unhurried pace of Destiny.

The interior of the church was cool and shadowy. The sunlight filtering through the stained windows filled the air with a subdued radiance, and the mass of flowers about the pulpit made a brilliant splash of color; but the shadows in the organ loft and among the beams of the high ceiling gave to the whole the softness of twilight—a contrast of light and shadow like that spread upon the earth when the sun has set behind clouds and as though loath to surrender his dominion to night has thrown his rays upon some cloud bank high in the heavens and thus bathed the earth in his reflected glory.

Wharton and Nancy found a seat in the back part of the church. About them was the subdued rustle of garments and book leaves and the hiss of whisperings. Then the preacher got to his feet and the noises ceased. Softly and with ever increasing

volume the mellow reeds of the organ began the solemn strains of the Doxology, and without other signal the congregation got to its feet. There were other songs—old songs that were loved by another generation—and the congregation sang with the choir, the high soprano of little children, always a little off key, competing with the wavering falsetto of white-haired men and women who sang without reference to their books.

Wharton had come expecting to be bored by a sermon. Instead, he found himself charmed by a talk.

Doctor Richards, a saint grown old and bent in the service of his Lord, had lost much of the fire of his youth. He did not gesture or shout. He stood with his hands on the open Bible and talked simply of man's duty to man and of the peace that comes to them who love one another and do good.

When the service was finished, the people left the church slowly, stopping in the aisles to divide with neighbors the flowers they had brought to grace the pulpit, to

select dinner guests, or to send a word of sympathy to those whom sickness had kept away. Wharton found himself shaking hands with many people he did not know. They knew his name, for he was a stranger and therefore a celebrity; and the hearty grip of their fingers confirmed the welcome they spoke.

On the way home from church Wharton turned to Nancy and said: "You have done me a second service."

"Did you enjoy it?" she asked.

"It was something more than enjoyment. It was an adventure in contentment. I am beginning to wonder why men scurry about the world in quest of prizes when they are free to withdraw from a competition that brings them little of value and come to rest in a haven such as this."

"They do not desire peace," said Nancy.
"They desire only the struggle and excitement of getting money; and money is valuable because it enables them to compete in the matter of display and purchase other forms of excitement. They are like those poor creatures who have learned to

depend on drugs for the zest to make life worth living; their scheme of existence is artificial; their every day is circus day, and their lives would be drab and intolerwithout the parade and the shrieking able calliope."

"Cynic," charged Wharton.

"It's a new form of cynicism, at any rate," she answered. "Here in our little out-of-the-way corner we have food and shelter, books, games, friends and work. Would life bring us more if our birds were driven away by the roar of elevated trains, and our nerves were frayed by poor little creatures crying extra editions on every corner?"

Wharton laughed. "You are a confirmed countryman," said he; "and countrymen are born, not made."

"Our hearts are where our treasures are," she answered.

"Our hearts, yes; but if we have no treasure we may drag our bodies where we will and nowhere find contentment."

"And yet you adventured in contentment to-day."

"To-day I adventured in quest of treasures," he answered gravely. "Contentment is the reward of finding them."

CHAPTER XII

Monday morning Robert Wharton took his store of wealth from the trunk and set off in company with Rogers to open an account at the Peoples Bank. They stopped at the post office, where Rogers got his morning paper, and were stopped again by Uncle Gus, who sat in his accustomed place under the awning.

"Mornin', folks," he greeted them. "Come and set a spell."

"We ain't got time," said Rogers. "Mr. Wharton here has been keepin' a sight o' money in his trunk, and he's on his way to bank it."

"Well, I'll say my say anyhow," said Uncle Gus, "and you kin take it standin'. I seed in Sunday's paper where they caught that bank robber, Mr. Wharton. And 'fore that, I seed that card the Chief had. The feller favored you about like a blue-jay favors a swamp rabbit. Had the same

number o' eyes. I thought maybe you'd like to know."

"It was a very close call," said Wharton, smiling. "And I am still guilty of being a stranger."

"Well, that ain't no hangin' crime," Uncle Gus chuckled. "And you're gittin' over it."

The two men walked on to the bank, and Wharton was introduced to the president, a Mr. Stackpole. He was a stocky little man with unkempt gray hair, who sat all day in a rocking-chair near a front window, smoking long cigars, reading his newspapers, and talking of crops and markets with the patrons of the bank. Behind a wire partition were young men who did the prosaic routine labor of the institution, but the little man in the rocking chair granted or denied loans and encouraged or thwarted the business enterprises of the community.

In Oakville, friendship was at times accepted as sufficient collateral for a loan. It was said, perhaps unjustly, that those whom Stackpole loved could borrow every

dollar in the bank on a plain note; while one he had reason to dislike couldn't borrow five cents on a corner lot in the New Jerusalem. He was, in fact, prone to be arbitrary and autocratic, as all men are when they have considerable authority and no competition; but he was shrewd and kind and reasonable, and unfailingly loyal to those who proved themselves worthy of trust. Wharton liked him at once.

"Like to open an account, eh?" said the banker. "Well, just give it to one of the boys there and he'll fix you up. While you're waiting, pull up a chair and get acquainted. Cal, push that spittoon out of the way and get another chair. Mighty glad to have you with us, Mr. Wharton. Think of locating here?"

"I haven't decided fully. I like your town and its people, but have no definite plans."

"It's a good little town, and we do a lot of business. Got a family?"

"No; I'm the last of the Whartons."

"Well, you're young yet. Which church do you affiliate with?"

Wharton flushed a little and found in his embarrassment cause for momentary resentment.

"None at present," he answered shortly. Then he laughed. "The church," said he,

"appears to be the hub of Oakville."

"Well, yes," the banker returned. "I had never thought of it in that way, but I have no doubt you are right. Our churches satisfy two primitive desires—the desire to worship a God, and the desire to associate with our fellows."

"Social centers?" Wharton suggested.

"That's it, exactly. I have a brother who went west years ago. He has a fine bank out there in the wheat country. We correspond regularly and swap ideas. He tells me that the social center in his town is the lodge. The lodges have sociables of one kind or another every week or so, and all the folks get together and enjoy rubbing elbows. Here, for no reason that I can explain, the lodges are a side line and the churches are the big factor in our lives."

"It seems rather odd," said Wharton.
"I have had some experience of churches,

but I have never thought of them as social centers. There are communities, peopled by fanatics, where the church is a tyrant. It prescribes strange and humiliating standards of conduct, and ostracizes those who dare to question its authority. Oakville is not like that."

"My stars, no!" cried the banker. "We are not religionists. My private opinion is that religionists are only half baked. They are no more natural than a threelegged calf. They are religious cranks, just as some men are political cranks, and they can't see more than three-eights of an inch in front of their own noses. Their disordered minds have conceived the notion that they are the salt of the earth a darned sight better than ordinary folks and a little bit better than God in some respects, and their foolish vanity persuades them that it is their duty to abolish everything that affords anybody pleasure and shroud the world in gloom. They do more harm to Christianity than all the cynics and agnostics in Christendom. You must excuse me, sir," he finished. "I get

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wrought up when I think about these addle-pates."

"I quite agree with you," answered Wharton, "though I had given them little thought. A fanatic will injure any cause. But where shall we draw the line between fanaticism and enthusiasm?"

"Common sense draws it. You hear wits say common sense is rare, but it isn't. It is bred in the bone of the race, like a duck's love for water. If a man would make the world wear sandals because Christ wore them, he is a fanatic. Foot wear has nothing to do with Christianity, and wearing sandals in this latitude would violate common sense. There's no virtue in freezing your toes. But if a man devotes his life to the job of establishing peace among men, as Christ taught it, that's a commendable enthusiasm; for peace is a matter of common sense, and war is a madness. The sanest of men may be enthusiastic advocates of Christianity; only the fanatics work up a sweat trying to force the world to observe the set rules conceived in their own disordered minds."

Rogers was much distressed. This was strange talk to make before a preacher. He watched Wharton closely for signs of indignation, ready at an instant's notice to silence the banker by such means as might be necessary. His fears were unfounded. Wharton obviously was enjoying the banker's frankness.

"Then you don't believe in a statutory millennium?" he asked, smiling.

"I certainly don't. Statutes are a necessity. They discourage vice and crime and protect the weak from the strong. But a coat of pretty paint won't set a broken leg. Statutes and the fear of punishment will make men decent on the outside, but something more is needed to make them decent on the inside. As the traveling men say, I'm sold on this matter of Christianity. I think it mixes well with business. I wouldn't give a snap of my finger for a Sunday religion. If religion isn't a good thing to have seven days a week, it isn't worth a darn. If it's just a matter of being solemn on Sunday and making the children stop their play and muffling the roosters so

they can't crow, then we're a lot better off without it."

"Aren't your views a little unusual?"

"Not around here, they're not. I know the towns in this section pretty well, and most of the small ones are pretty much like this one. And you'll find most everybody has ideas concerning religion very similar to mine. Religion is just an everyday business."

"That sounds very simple."

"It is simple. A man joins a political party because he believes in the things the party stands for. He isn't ashamed of his allegiance. And if he is a Republican, he isn't a Republican one day of the week and a Democrat the other six. He sticks to his principles all the time. And he doesn't get red in the face and swallow his Adam's apple and stutter when some leading politician asks him where he stands. Whatever he is, he's proud of it; and he doesn't hesitate to talk about it. That's the way we feel about Christianity. Christ was the founder of our party. We hold that his principles are faultless. They suit us down

to the ground. The things he taught, we believe in, and we're for him heart and soul. We've got a streak of the devil in us that keeps us from being as loyal as we should, and a lot of times I think we ought to be read out of the party; but we cling to our faith and keep trying."

"Isn't it a little more difficult to become a Christian than to join a political party?" Wharton asked.

"In a way, yes. A man's politics depends on his raising. If his father and his neighbors belong to one party, the chances are that he will join them. It will be more a matter of environment than of reason. But if he grows up without taking any interest in politics, and then starts in to make a choice between parties, he has to think the thing out for himself. Or if he switches from one party to the other, he has to do more or less thinking, and that's hard. It's the same way with religion. If children are raised in the Sunday school and taught that Christianity is the only reasonable and wholesome guide to living, they will accept the faith and join the church as a

matter of course. If they are not raised right, they have to go through a pretty hard strain before they can make it. The preachers say they must be converted. That's a pretty big word, and I don't pretend to understand it. I've seen saw logs converted into boards, and I once converted a livery stable into a garage. I reckon it's something like that—some fundamental change. When we have big meeting and all of us join forces to convert the young fellows who are not Christians, just like party workers hustle before an election, I notice that about all we can do is to get them to thinking. The boys attend the meetings, and when I get a chance I say something to them about it, and they listen respectfully and say 'yes' and 'no'; but I can't tell whether I am making any impression or not. Maybe not. And then some night when the preacher gives his invitation, they get out of their seats and go up to offer their hands. Some take it easy, like a summer shower, and some act like they were knocked about by a cyclone. It's too deep for me. All I know is that they regret

having belonged to the other party, and stand up there to look the world in the face and proclaim their faith in Christ."

He broke off suddenly as one of the young men back of the partition tapped against the wire netting. "I see your book's ready," said he; and got up from his rocking-chair. He stepped back to a window in the partition and returned with a small leather-bound book which he held open and examined closely.

"Great guns!" he exclaimed. "That's a right healthy deposit, Mr. Wharton. Twenty-five, even. Well, I'm mighty glad to have your business. Drop in again sometime, and we'll talk some other kind of politics."

While he was yet speaking, the outer door opened and Bull Franks entered. He had been drinking and was ripe for a quarrel. He fumbled with the door latch while he glanced quickly at the three who stood near the partition, and then strode forward with his eyes on the cashier's window.

Rogers and the banker perceived at once

that he purposed brushing against Wharton, whose back was turned, and both spoke a warning. Even as they spoke, Bull's heavy shoulder found its mark and Wharton caught at the coats of his companions to keep himself from falling. He flushed with quick resentment, and then at once turned and bowed gravely. "I beg your pardon," said he. "I was in the way."

"You was," growled Bull. "Some folks is born that way."

Wharton eyed the big man coolly.

"I suspect you of being Bull Franks," said he.

"Your suspicions is right," returned the other. "And I'm a bad man to cross. This ain't no Slim you're talkin' to now."

"I suspected that, also," said Wharton, smiling a little. "I should classify you as a stout—far too stout to court trouble."

Bull was a little taken aback by this audacity, but he held his ground. "You're smart," said he, "and you're handy with your fists, but don't cross me; that's all, don't cross me. If ever you make a pass

at me, I'll fasten you. That's what I'll do. And when I fastens you, you'll let the goat out. You'll say: 'Folks, take 'im off.' That's what you'll say."

"That's enough, Bull," interrupted the banker coldly. "If you wish to quarrel with Mr. Wharton, get outside."

Bull turned to the cashier's window and said no more. In accordance with his standards he had vindicated the family honor and established his own fearlessness by means of this war talk. For the present he was content.

When he was gone, Wharton met the banker's eyes and smiled.

"I'm afraid he doesn't belong to your political party," said he.

"Not Bull," stated the banker emphatically. "Bull and highland moccasins were made of the same piece. He's a bully when he is drinking, and treacherous when sober. Better watch out for him."

Wharton laughed. "You are the third to warn me," said he. "But dangerous men seldom waste time boasting."

The epigram established his knowledge of [145]

human nature and his ignorance of Bull Franks' nature.

Ignorance and pride make a dangerous combination; and yet it was by this combination that Wharton was destined to learn the bitterness of humiliation and thus surmount the last difficulty in the way of his ultimate triumph.

CHAPTER XIII

Pride is in one particular similar to liberty. Men will fight for liberty, offering their lives and their fortunes in the effort to obtain it, coining noble phrases to stir the hearts of future generations, and when they are established as a free people they will begin to acquire colonies and exploit peoples who are weaker than themselves. If the truth were told, there are few men in the world who deserve liberty and fewer still who can be trusted with it. It is a dangerous possession; and not infrequently, by persuading men to resent measures of restraint, it ceases to be liberty and becomes a kind of slavery to folly and license.

A little pride is wholesome and essential. A little pride persuades a man to keep his mind and body clean, enables him to look his fellows in the eye, stiffens his knees when he would run away, and serves in many ways to make him more respectable. But when pride becomes too great it be-

comes blind. It no longer serves to keep a man from fault and error, for, being blind, he is persuaded that he is faultless and can do no wrong. It teaches him to magnify his own importance and despise those who are not in all points such as he is. And because it persuades him to believe himself perfect, it binds him fast to his imperfections and gives him no opportunity to improve his condition. The most hopelessly ignorant man in the world is a proud fool.

It is this fault of pride run amuck that keeps many men from becoming Christians. They do not oppose Christianity. In fact, they think it a very good thing for those who need it. They are rather pleased than otherwise that the world contains a religion that will devote itself to the business of persuading wicked men to a better way of living. But they do not concede that Christianity has anything to offer them. They look themselves over and fail to see where there is any room for improvement. And, they reason quite logically, if they are perfect now, why interest themselves

in a religion that is confessedly designed for the purpose of saving imperfect men?

It is for a similar reason that a rich man may find it difficult to enter the kingdom of Heaven. There is no wickedness in wealth, any more than there is virtue in poverty. The idea that the poor will get to Heaven by reason of their poverty is an insult to intelligence. If poverty takes a man to Heaven, it will take him against his will and over his protest; for he doesn't wish to be poor. He wishes to be rich, and most of his waking hours are devoted to the business of acquiring riches. The idea that money is an evil is a foolish idea, invented by a poor man as a sop to his envy, or invented by a rich man to keep his serfs contented. But riches do operate to keep men out of Heaven, for the simple reason that one who is satisfied with his present state will make small effort to find a better. The rich man is prone to find his riches sufficient and miss Heaven because he feels no need of it. One who is full does not struggle for something to eat.

There are four chief prides—pride of birth, pride of intellect, pride of possessions, and pride of physical prowess. Robert Wharton possessed all four.

None of the Whartons had been addicted to boasting. Boasting they considered vulgar. But they were an excellent breed, long accustomed to soft hands and correct manners, and in a quiet, inoffensive way they were proud of the blood that was in them. Robert was content to be a Wharton. Unconsciously, perhaps, but none the less surely, he was proud of his intellectual attainments. His mind worked with the delicate precision of a watch. If he was not proud of his intellectual superiority, he was at least complacently aware of it. He was not proud of his possessions in the sense that he desired to make a display of them; but during his young manhood, when the fortune of the elder Wharton had seemed limitless, he had looked upon it as a mark of worth and a just tribute to the merit of Whartons; and even though the fortune had dwindled to a mere twentyfive thousand dollars, he had been aware

of a momentary sense of gratification when Banker Stackpole had shown himself impressed by the entry in the deposit book. His chief pride, and least offensive because most frank, was in his physical prowess. He came near to worshiping his body, as the ancient Greeks did before him. He was proud of his swelling biceps, of the velvet steel in his thighs, of the ridged muscles that protected his abdomen. He was proud of his ability to walk or run for hours without distress, and doubly proud of the uncanny skill of his fists and that knack of bringing a murderous right swing from his knees.

None of his prides were offensive. They did not lessen the charm of his personality. But they made him content with Robert Wharton, and they taught him to excuse any fault in himself that he might have condemned in another; and when he had blundered, they sought at once to justify the blunder because it had been the work of a Wharton.

Thus, while pride in his standards caused him to feel a very real and humiliating

shame when death and the futility of sorrow revealed him to himself as a play actor, other pride came quickly to his rescue and began to persuade him that little of the fault had been his own. He had been but a unit in an established system. He had begun to preach without first being converted to an unquestioning faith in the religion he taught; so, also, had other men. Preaching was becoming a sort of trade, in which any man was free to engage at his pleasure; and since this condition was tolerated and not condemned, why should he upbraid himself? This line of reasoning did not content him; in spite of it he would not have returned to the status he had once found satisfactory; but it served to restore his self-respect, and by means of it and the healing influence of time he regained the complacency that was at once his strength and his weakness.

As the days passed he became more and more a part of Oakville. He played tennis or went on fishing expeditions with the young people, learned to enjoy the drowsy afternoons and the evening lawn parties,

and enjoyed as well interminable discussions with Banker Stackpole and Uncle Gus. When conversations turned on religion, as frequently they did, he listened much and talked little; and because these conversations revealed his intimate knowledge of the Bible, people took his Christianity for granted. The Rogers family respected his incognito. To them he remained one of the great of earth, and it is probable that they found their secret a source of much gratification.

Nancy's love endured and grew, but she kept this secret, also; never a day passed but she had an hour or more with him, and she found grace to be content with his friendship. There was no place in Wharton's heart for more. His love for the girl who had turned away from him had been genuine. He did not permit his thoughts to dwell upon it, but it endured and would endure. He would not have returned to her, for she had proved herself unworthy, but the love in his heart for the image of her as she had seemed was a barrier to any new love. He enjoyed Nancy's company.

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When he talked to her, his eyes dwelt on the flicker of light in the waves of her hair or the single dimple that appeared at times in her cheek, and he made deliberate effort to win a laugh in order that he might enjoy the sight of her faultless teeth; but his pulse did not quicken at sight of her, and the world did not seem empty when she was not by his side.

He continued his morning walks with Billy. He rambled far, following little-used roads or making his own path across the fields, but always he walked first to the pine wood and breathed deep of the resinous odors in its depths. The days were growing warmer, and frequently as he walked he was conscious of thirst. He preferred to lie full length among leaves and drink from some rock-incased spring in a thicket of poplars; but when no spring appeared he would approach a wayside cabin and draw a bucket of water from a shallow dug well.

It was this practice that proved his undoing.

April had gone and the dry heat of May

had begun to wither the gardens and drive browsing cattle to the shade of pasture trees, when one morning he awoke with an oppressive and persistent headache. He ate little breakfast, and was early afield to cleanse his system with oxygen. Guided only by force of habit and with little pleasure in the exercise, he walked to the pine wood and there stopped to rest. He was conscious of a great weariness, a lassitude so complete that the simple act of lifting his hand required an effort of will power. For several days he had felt unfit, but he had attributed his lack of energy to the oppressive heat. Now he began to realize that he was a very sick man. A wandering breeze found its way into the little hollow in the midst of the pines, and he shivered at the touch of it. His face burned as though an irritant had been applied, and he was conscious of a great thirst. He touched his lips with his tongue. They were dry and hot.

"Billy," he muttered, "we are a long way from a bed, and I fear we can't make it back. I am about finished."

He leaned forward and rested his face in Γ 155 Γ

his hands, and thus remained for so long a time, without speech or movement, that Billy felt himself dismissed and wandered away about business of his own. In another little hollow, and hidden by a rise of ground topped with tangled blackberry vines, there was a single white oak among the pines. It was hollow near the ground, and Billy chose to believe that some resident of the wood dwelt in the hollow. He had conceived this idea when first he saw the oak, and on that occasion had yelped furiously and spent much energy in a futile effort to dig up the tree. Later he learned the futility of yelping and digging, and was content to lie at a little distance from the hollow and watch it with eager eyes, his ears upcocked and drooping at the points, his tail moving slowly among the leaves. This was not a hunt; it was a game—a game requiring a vivid imagination and infinite patience. Billy never tired of it, and it was his custom to continue the play until Wharton's shrill whistle recalled him to finish the walk among the fields or the journey home.

It is necessary to leave Wharton and Billy for a little while and return to town and the stable where Bull and Slim Franks sat in their tiny littered office, consuming a quart of a clear and villainous liquid that had been brought from the mountains during the night by an adventurous bootlegger.

Whisky, whatever its quality, invariably recalled to their minds the wrongs they had suffered at the hands of Robert Wharton.

"I tell you, Bull," the younger Franks was saying, "it can't help but work. You know that old bay mule what we traded Baldy for? Well, he got out yisterday and wandered off and I went lookin' for him. Shine went with me. The mule had lost a shoe an' we tracked him easy. He went out that road towards Belton's pine woods, and that's where we found him. While we was gittin' a halter on 'im, I heard something in the pines and walked in a little ways and there was Wharton a settin' on a log. Me and Shine got to talkin' about it, an' he says Wharton walks out

there every mornin' and comes back that way 'long about noon. All we got to do is git us a couple o' good sticks and lay there and wait for him and then jest up an' beat hell out of 'im.''

"All right, Slim. Suits me. Let's kill this an' light out."

Twenty minutes later the two brothers stood at the edge of the pine wood. They did not expect Wharton for another hour, and began leisurely to look about for saplings that would make satisfactory clubs. A few young hickories, admirably suited to their purpose, grew near the edge of the wood, and each produced a heavy knife and began to prepare a weapon.

When their work was finished they turned to enter the pines, stepping and speaking softly, not because they feared detection but because it is the nature of man to speak in guarded tones when he plans a wrong.

Presently they topped a little rise and the quicker Slim caught his brother by the arm and drew him back.

"Sh!" he warned. "That's him a settin'

down there now. We got 'im if he don't run."

"He ain't the runnin' kind," Bull whispered. "We'll walk down easy like, an' not make no noise, and when he gits up you do the talkin'. Cuss him out and git him started, and I'll git in the first lick. Come on and step easy."

They began a slow descent into the hollow. Now and then a twig snapped under one brother's foot, and the other turned a scowling face in rebuke. For all their caution they made considerable noise. Any man awake and possessed of his senses would have been warned of their approach. But the silent man who sat on the log with his face in his hands did not stir. Bull was a little in the lead. He approached on stealthy feet until he stood at Wharton's back, so close that he might have reached out his hand and touched his victim. He turned and motioned to Slim to hold his place.

In the other little hollow, hidden by the rise of ground and the vines, Billy was beginning to tire of his fruitless vigil. The

best of games becomes a bore if too long continued. He was beginning to wonder why the man who was his god did not whistle for his return, and was on the point of returning without a summons when there came to his ears a succession of peculiar thudding sounds that brought him to his feet alive with curiosity.

Bull motioned to Slim to hold his place, and then placed his feet more firmly, tightened his grasp on the green hickory, and gave his weight to the blow. The club hissed in the air and struck Wharton above the ear with a sound as dull as the fall of a hoof on a dusty roadbed. Wharton did not rise. He did not utter a sound. He made a helpless, convulsive movement as though endeavoring to regain his feet, and then fell forward on his face.

Bull turned a hard and cruel face to Slim. "Work on him till you're satisfied," he growled.

Slim needed no second invitation. In one step he cleared the fallen pine, and his club began to rise and fall. At each blow he grunted. And so he might have con-

tinued until the breath had gone from Wharton's sick body, except for Billy.

Billy, approaching at an easy gallop, made a detour about the tangle of vines. Instantly he understood the action in the little hollow at his feet, and instantly he sprang forward, a tawny bolt that seemed to flash above the ground, the snarl in his throat so eager with hate that it seemed almost a whine.

Bull's yell of warning came too late. Slim's club was upraised for another blow when a snarl and a flash of color told him of his peril. He had no time to turn, but instinctively lowered his hand to protect his face. Flashing fangs that sought his throat caught his wrist instead and met between the bones. With a cry of pain and fear he stumbled backward, tripped against a root and fell. Instantly the dog was at his face and a fang laid open his cheek.

Bull sprang forward, swinging his club. He struck with all the quickness at his command, but the dog was away while yet the club hissed in the air. Bull followed

warily; but the dog backed away, ever snarling, ever elusive.

Presently Bull turned back to his fallen brother and knelt beside him, the club still clasped tightly in his hand. He watched the dog closely, but Billy stood at a distance, his mane bristling, a growl rumbling in his throat.

Slim was able to get to his feet, but the blood spurted from his wrist in a little stream and the fear of death was upon him.

"For God's sake," he gasped, "tie up my wrist, Bull. I'm a goin' to bleed to death. Hurry, can't you. God A'mighty, do somethin' quick."

Bull produced a soiled handkerchief and bound the torn wrist with a force that brought from his brother a curse of protest.

"It's got to be tight," he growled. "Now let's git to hell out o' here. A pretty mess we made of it. Why didn't you watch what you was doin'?"

When the brothers were gone, Billy crept to the side of his fallen master and sniffed about him, whining. Wharton did not stir.

His body was bruised almost past belief, and blood trickled down his temple from an ugly wound above his ear, but he felt no pain. He was, indeed, as he had confided to Billy, "about finished."

CHAPTER XIV

There was no sound in the little hollow in the midst of the pines. Wharton lay as he had fallen, one arm under his body, his face in the pine needles. Gnats buzzed about his head. Ants crawled upon his hands and face. The sun had climbed to a point directly overhead, and through the meager foliage of the pines its rays beat down upon him unmercifully.

Billy lay near, watchful and helpless. For a little while he had whined dolefully and licked the face of his fallen hero, but when these attentions had failed to win a response he had withdrawn a little way and settled himself to wait.

An hour passed, and presently Wharton stirred and groaned. Billy was at his side in a bound, quivering and whining with eagerness and rejoicing. He began again to lick his master's face, and doubtless it was the sheer annoyance of this ministra-

tion that cleared Wharton's deadened senses and opened his eyes.

Once fully restored to consciousness, he did not groan again. He essayed to rise, and the effort cost him a pain so excruciating and unbearable that he relaxed and dropped his face again to the carpet of pine needles.

He wondered dully if he had fainted. A little while ago he had been filled with a great weariness and all his joints ached, but now the pain was intensified and localized. There was an ache in his back like the hurt of a sprain, and a sharp pain in his side that seemed to tear at his flesh when he breathed. The pain in his head was the worst. There was an ache that was like a monotonous undertone, and another, quite distinct from the first, that throbbed like the beating of a hammer.

The very intensity of the pains cleared his mind of stupor. And gradually he began to realize that pains such as these could not be the work of sickness that had claimed him but a little while before. He moved his head slowly until there was

brought within his range of vision a freshly cut stick of hickory that lay at a little distance among the needles. It was too heavy for a walking stick, and upon the larger end of it, where the bark had been peeled away, there was a dark stain about which the ants clustered.

He had not fainted, then. Apparently Bull Franks had made good his boast. But how had an enemy come upon him without his knowledge? He remembered only an hour of misery, when he had sat with his face in his hands—a weight that had seemed to crush him—and darkness. And Billy? Had Billy fallen victim, also? He spoke the dog's name softly, and a moist, cool nose touched his face. So Billy had escaped.

He must have help, of course. A sick man couldn't lie indefinitely in a pine wood. Doubtless they would search for him after a time; but searching parties go far astray, and he was very thirsty. He could not remember ever having desired anything as he now desired water. He wished to bury his face in some cool spring, to lie full length

in some clear pool, to drink, even to hear the drip of water.

Well, one must not surrender. He would lift his head regardless of the pain, and by some means get to a sitting posture beside the log. With infinite patience and a measure of torture that caused the breath to hiss sharply between his teeth, he got to his elbows; rested for a little while; and with a final effort, that bathed his face in perspiration, dragged himself to the log and sat with his back against it. Several minutes passed before he stirred again. When he opened his eyes, they rested on the club of hickory. The club should explain that throbbing of terrific blows that beat upon his head. He lifted a hand slowly and felt of the matted hair above his ear. It was dry and stiff, save for one damp spot where the flesh was raw. He lowered his hand and looked at his fingers. They were red.

Billy was at his side again with his annoying attentions. He moved his head to escape the dog's caressing tongue. How one's best friends trouble one with their awkward efforts to be of service when one

wishes to be alone! If Billy would only go away. The thought suggested a means of summoning help. He felt in a pocket of his coat and found a notebook and pencil. Slowly and laboriously he wrote a brief message and tore the leaf from the book. When this task was finished, he faced another problem that filled him with despair. Billy could not be trusted to carry the note in his mouth. He felt about the lapels of his coat for a pin, and found none. He must have some means of fastening the note to the dog's collar. What a great price he would have paid for a piece of string! After an interval of minutes he lifted his head and began to pull at his tie. With his penknife he split the fabric and contrived to make a string that would answer his purpose. One end he tied about the sheet of paper; the other was tied to Billy's collar so that the note dangled several inches beneath his throat. When all was done, Wharton summoned his remaining strength and spoke to the dog sharply.

"Go home," he commanded.

Billy turned away with drooping tail and [168]

ears. He was schooled to instant and complete obedience, but he did not wish to go away. At a little distance he turned and lifted his ears hopefully as though beseeching Wharton to change his mind.

Wharton's voice lifted with the strength of despair. "Go home," he cried. Billy turned again, every line of his body proclaiming his humiliation and dejection, and trotted off through the pines. Twice he stopped to look back, whined coaxingly, and resumed his journey.

When the dog was out of sight, Wharton closed his eyes, leaned forward slowly, slid gently to the ground, and sank fathoms deep in a grateful darkness.

The Rogers family had not been alarmed by Wharton's absence from the dinner table. On many occasions he had appeared an hour late, hot and dusty from his walk, and had been content to devour cold meat after his shower. Mrs. Rogers selected the choicest pieces of chicken and placed them in a covered dish in the oven, and Cal accepted this as proof that Wharton had not come in and made no comment.

When the dishes were finished and the dining room placed in order, Nancy found her sewing basket and retreated to the inviting shade of the front porch while her mother went upstairs for a nap. She was sitting in one of the hickory rockers, dreaming over her needle, when Billy appeared and dropped to the floor beside her. She was at once alarmed. The return of Billy without his master suggested calamity. She spoke to him in a sharp, frightened voice. "Why, Billy," she demanded, "where is Mr. Wharton?" Billy thumped his tail against the floor and cocked his ears in friendly fashion, and his lifted head revealed the note that hung from his collar. Nancy seized the paper eagerly and opened it. There was a stain of blood from the print of a finger, and a penciled scrawl that was almost unintelligible. She held it closer and deciphered the words: "Sick in pine wood." Her face went white and for a moment all her strength went from her: but in an instant she was on her feet and racing to the back of the house. The garage door was open, for the car had been

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used during the morning. She touched the starter and had the gears in reverse before the motor had gathered headway. As she turned the car under the trees and changed to low gear, the thought came to her that she would not be able to lift Wharton. She must get her father, and he would be at the cotton yard.

Love and fear move on swift feet. Combine them and give them control of forty horses leashed under a hood, and the limit of speed is that fixed by the manufacturers of the car. Nancy took the corners on two tires that flattened under the strain, shot to the curb to dodge a ramshackle buggy pulled by a decrepit mule, and slid the last fifty feet to the cotton yard on locked wheels.

"Daddy," she cried, "get in quick."
Rogers turned at her call and hurried
forward, his face white with anxiety.

"What's wrong, Nance?" he demanded. "Is Ma sick?"

"It's Mr. Wharton," she answered quickly. "Please hurry." Rogers stumbled over the running board and fell into

the tonneau. The car was under way before he gained the seat. Nancy drove with her eyes straight ahead and her foot flat on the accelerator. Rogers leaned forward, clutching the back of her seat, and she told him briefly of the note.

"Blood!" he cried. "Then it's them sorry Franks boys. If they've done him dirt, I'll fill 'em so full o' holes ——" He broke off abruptly and touched Nancy's shoulder. "Can't you go a little faster?" he asked.

"It's wide open," she cried over her shoulder. "Look out!"

As she spoke she took the turn to the open road, slid to the ditch, and shot forward along the highway. Two minutes later the car was parked at the edge of the wood. Far down the road a moving puff of dust marked the progress of Billy, who had fallen from the running board at the last turn.

Rogers led the way, stumbling in his haste, to the little hollow where Wharton lay behind the fallen tree. He stooped and shook Wharton roughly by the shoulder,

thoughtless and cruel by reason of his anxiety. Wharton opened his eyes, struggled to his elbow and essayed a twisted smile. "Good old Billy," he muttered.

Nancy knelt quickly at his side and placed an arm about his shoulders. With a handkerchief she began to brush away the ants that gathered about the ugly wound in his head. Rogers glanced about shrewdly for signs of conflict and stepped aside to pick up the hickory club.

"This is what he done it with," said he.

"Did both of 'em jump on you?"

"I didn't see them," Wharton answered weakly. "I was sick and sat on the log and some one struck me from behind."

"The sneakin' murderin' hounds," cried Rogers. "I'll git 'em for this. I'll sure git 'em. So help me God, I'll git 'em."

Wharton did not appear to be interested in retribution. "I am very thirsty," he said.

"Daddy," cried Nancy, "they can wait. Help me get him to the car. He needs a doctor."

With one of his friends on either side to [173]

support him Wharton negotiated the short journey to the car without faltering. They got him to the back seat, and Nancy climbed in with him. "You drive, Daddy," she directed; and during the return journey Wharton's bleeding head was pillowed on her breast and her arms supported him.

When the car was drawn up to the porch steps, Mrs. Rogers appeared from the hallway, white and shaken. "O, my people," she moaned. "O, my people." It was her favorite cry of distress. Her anxiety and fear did not make her useless. She helped Wharton from the car and supported half of his weight up the steps while Nancy ran to prepare the bed in the downstairs guest room. "Git the doctor, Cal," she commanded, when Wharton had sunk gratefully to the soft mattress. "And Nance, you git him a drink o' water. My stars, he's burnin' up with fever and beat nigh to death."

The doctor arrived promptly. He was a lean, gray man, with a ruddy face and a brusque manner that camouflaged an exceedingly tender heart.

"What's all this foolishness?" he demanded, as he began to remove his coat and roll up his sleeves. "When did it happen?" he continued, as he felt the stiffened mass of Wharton's hair.

"This morning," the sick man answered.

"Huh. This fever didn't happen this morning. Hold this in your mouth a minute. Miss Nancy, you get us some hot water and towels while we get this man undressed. I'll call you when we need you. If I'm not mistaken, this man is sick besides what ails him. Hum," he muttered as he read the thermometer. "Hundred and five. A cracked head didn't do that in a few hours. Were you sick to start with?"

Wharton nodded.

"Thought so. Had a headache; sore in the joints; couldn't eat much; didn't give a darn about anything. Am I right?"

Wharton nodded again, smiling feebly.

"Typhoid, young man; or I'm no pill peddler. You're in for a long rest. No danger, though." While he talked, the doctor was busily removing Wharton's clothing. "My soul and body!" he ex-

claimed, when the last garment was removed. "What a physique! Young man, I'd have typhoid twice to get a body like that. Let's see that shoulder. Great snakes, man; your whole back is bruised up. Who did this, Cal?"

"He don't know," said Rogers. "They jumped on 'im behind, and he never seen 'em. But it was them Franks boys. They ain't nobody else mean enough."

"Well, he'll pull through. Get some pajamas for him. I'll have to take a stitch or two in that head. By the way, Wharton has a dog, hasn't he?"

"A Jim-dandy," said Cal.

There was a knock at the front door and Rogers hastened to answer it. Bull Franks stood outside the screen, keeping one eye on Billy, who stood at a little distance with bristling mane and snarling lip.

"I heard the doctor was here," said Bull, "and I need him bad. Slim is bleedin' ag'in."

"He's here," said Cal shortly, "but he's

busy."

"I got to have him quick," Bull declared,

and placed his hand on the knob of the screen door.

Rogers stepped back and picked up a chair. "If you open that there door," he said quietly, "I'll brain you, you sneakin' yellow hound."

Doctor Small had heard their voices and come to the door of the guest room. "What's the trouble, Bull?" he demanded.

"Slim's bleedin' ag'in, Doc; and I can't git it stopped."

"Get Doctor Brown, then; I can't leave."

"Doc Brown's out o' town."

"Then you get back there and bind that wrist tight enough to stop the bleeding. I'll be there as quick as I can, but I can't leave Mr. Wharton now."

Bull backed off the porch, still keeping a wary eye on Billy.

"What's the matter with Slim?" asked Rogers.

"Dog chewed him up," said the doctor tersely. "Bit through his wrist and split his cheek open."

"Happy day!" cried Rogers. "I'll git that dog Billy a gold collar if it busts me."

The two men returned to the guest room and gave their attention to Wharton. An hour later he was stitched and bandaged and asleep between cool sheets. The doctor had given instructions and was preparing to leave. "Nursing is the principal thing," said he. "Shall I put in a long distance call for a trained nurse?"

Rogers hesitated, and Nancy answered for him. "We'll take good care of him, doctor," said she. "A nurse would only be in the way."

CHAPTER XV

Oakville was not long in ignorance of Wharton's illness. In a small town, small events have great significance. The chief interest of the inhabitants is one another. This is not because of any inherent quality of mind or temperament that differentiates them from people who dwell in cities, but because of a degree of isolation, little understood by the inhabitants of large towns, that establishes a community of interest and a very real fellowship. They are like a colony established on some strange shore, or a ship's company at sea. If they are not cut off from the outside world, at least they are shielded from its anxieties and excitements; so that they are prone to live in a little universe of their own, in all matters sufficient unto themselves.

This isolation is rather encouraged than otherwise by the press of the country. One would suppose that thousands of daily newspapers, penetrating to every out-of-

the-way village in the land with the story of the day's happenings throughout the world, would tend to link city with hamlet and establish a bond of fellowship.

These daily newspapers, however, are of, by, and for the cities. Each prints the news of its own community and the news received over the wire from other cities. The headlines shriek of events in Budapest, Valparaiso, Seattle, Nagasaki—of events in cities everywhere, but never of events in the country. The view point of the newspapers is that of the cities in which they are printed.

It may be said in explanation that news is a product of cities, and that nothing happens in the country. The obvious answer is that events in the rural sections are proportioned to the density of population.

In a village of one thousand people, five persons may die of pneumonia within twenty-four hours and metropolitan newspapers will print no record of their passing. But if within a similar period pneumonia claims five in each thousand of a city's

million people, metropolitan newspapers all over the world will shriek of the disaster. Or if, in a village containing twenty business houses, fire destroys one-tenth of them, only the newspapers in the smaller cities near by will carry the story; while a fire that destroys one in ten of a city's business houses will arouse the pity and consternation of the world.

When a small town newspaper mentions the fact that John Jones has lost a fine cow, city readers smile. Yet a proportionate loss in a city containing ten thousand times the property value of the small town would not only be recorded in the local newspapers but would be accepted as important news by every other metropolitan newspaper in the land.

The magazines are printed in cities, and are written, for the most part, by city men. Unconsciously they breathe a city air. The rural sections feel no more part in them than they feel in a lyceum or Chautauqua number that comes to entertain at a price and be on its way.

This condition is in large measure the [181]

result of the fact that able men leave the country for the city's greater rewards. If a nation's brilliant men are congregated in cities, it is because cities offer a market place for their brilliance. The objection to this arrangement is that, in a land where a majority of native-born citizens live at a distance from paved streets, the brilliant men are out of touch with the country and are persuaded by their environment to consider the native-born city dweller a majority.

Before the shades of evening had fallen, every inhabitant of Oakville knew that Robert Wharton lay sick of a fever. They knew, also, that some person or persons unknown had assaulted him without warning as he sat alone in the pine wood and done him grievous hurt. They knew, or thought they knew, the identity of these mysterious assailants; and knowing Wharton to be possessed of a dog that was his constant companion, they placed two and two together and rejoiced that Slim Franks had received his just deserts.

Uncle Gus had called at the Rogers home

early in the afternoon, as scores of others had done, to make inquiry concerning his friend, and after nightfall he returned to sit on the porch in the dark and share Cal's anxiety.

"They can't fool me, Uncle Gus," Rogers was saying. "It was them Franks boys sure, an' one is jest as guilty as t'other. Slim would o' been scared to go out there by hisself, even if he knowed Mr. Wharton was sick. I seen blood on the ground ten feet from where Mr. Wharton was, an' I know danged well it was Slim's blood. This here town ought to do somethin'."

"It's already done somethin', Cal. I seed some of the business men this evenin' and made arrangements to git Chief Wilson fired. We'll git a real man for police, an' we'll shet off the licker supply. That'll tame the Frankses right sharply. But jest at present they ain't nothin' else we kin do, fur as I know."

"Why ain't they?" demanded Cal. "Ain't they no law to punish a pair o' low-down skunks for beatin' a man nigh to death, an' him sick?"

"Not unless you kin prove they done it, Cal."

"I don't need no proof."

"You don't, maybe; but you couldn't git on the jury. Bull Franks says Slim was bit by a hound what come in the stable an' jumped on 'im. Bull, he run to git a gun while Slim was a fightin' the hound, an' the dog got away. Nobody ain't seen it since. Bull, he says it was sure mad, an' he's sent to the county seat to git that Pasteur treatment. Now, if he tells that story to a jury, what you goin' to do? Nobody seen the Frankses comin' back from the pine woods, fur as I kin find out. They could o' come up the alley without nobody noticin' 'em, maybe; but we ain't got nothin' to go on but circumstantial evidence, an' I wouldn't convict nobody on that."

"How come you wouldn't?"

"Well, I'll tell you how come. When I first come to town, they was a feller hitched a mule in the alley behind Thompson's store, an' somebody went along there an' jabbed a knife in his leg. When the feller

seen it, he raised Cain an' got the police. It was sech a low-down trick, everybody was mad like an' tryin' to find the skunk what done it. This feller had a neighbor what he'd been quarrelin' with on account o' yearlin's gittin' in his corn, and when he seen the neighbor in the crowd he up an' told the police to arrest him. Both of 'em wanted a trial right quick, an' the mayor was willin', so they drawed a jury and went at it. I was drawed on the jury. The mayor asked this feller if he'd been through the alley, an' he said he had; and then he asked him if he'd had a knife in his hand, an' he said he had and was whittlin' on a stick; and then he asked him was they bad blood betwixt him and this other feller, an' he said they was. It looked plumb plain to me, and when the jury went out I was all het up an' jest itchin' to ease my mind. I done it good an' proper, and the jury fetched in a verdict o' guilty. The mayor fined the feller fifty dollars; an' folks thought he got off light. Well, sir, things went on for a week an' then that blacksmith Curry what used to live here

come to the mayor an' said he done it. He said he was drinkin' and whittlin' an' the mule made out like he was goin' to kick and he jest jabbed him with his knife.

"I think these Franks boys is guilty, but I've done found out a man ain't got no business thinkin' that-a-way without no evidence to go on. Anyhow, it don't pay to be in too big a hurry. We'll jest wait a spell an' keep ca'm an' see what happens."

While they talked, the crackle of leaves under foot announced the coming of a late visitor, and Banker Stackpole's voice spoke from the steps.

"Is that you, Cal?"

"Me and Uncle Gus," answered Rogers. "Come up an' set with us."

"I haven't time. I just dropped by to ask about Wharton."

"He's makin' out."

"Got plenty of company?"

"Plenty, I reckon. Me and Uncle Gus sets up till midnight, and two of the boys is comin' in then."

"I suppose you've heard about Slim Franks?"

"We heard he was bit up like he ought to o' been."

"Well, he died this evening. Lost too much blood, the doctor said; he has been drinking a great deal of mean whisky lately, and he wasn't in shape to stand it. Funeral to-morrow at eleven."

"You didn't hear if he said anything afore he died?"

"I imagine not. He went to sleep, and died while his wife was out in another room. She is taking it pretty hard."

"Funny about women folks," mused Uncle Gus. "Don't make no difference how sorry a man is, they stick to 'im. Fanny is a good woman, too. I've knowed her since she was a chap. Wonder if Slim had any insurance?"

"Probably not," answered the banker. "He gave little thought to his family. I suppose Bull will take care of them."

"Most likely," agreed Uncle Gus. "He's got that much good in him."

His opinion concerning the quantity of good in Bull Franks might not have endured intact if he had known in what manner

Bull occupied his time during the two hours immediately following his brother's death. He had gone at once to his stable and despatched his negro boy in quest of whisky, and thus fortified had driven at breakneck speed to the county seat. There he had visited a meat market and a drug store. As a sequel to these visits, the negro boy he called "Shine" lay hidden among the trees on the Rogers lawn, listening to the conversation of the men on the porch.

He was a very much frightened boy, and he longed ardently to be gone, but terror of his "boss man" neutralized his fear of wrongdoing. His eyes were round and white with fear and rolled continually from one side to the other in search of stealthy ogres, but he held his post.

When the banker was gone, the boy crept forward, circled the house at a safe distance, and dropped a fragment of raw beef on the clean-swept sand of the back yard. Rogers' hound was chained to the wood shed. It began to bay furiously, and the boy leaped among the fig bushes,

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threw caution to the winds and fled. The resonant twang of distant wires marked his passage across lots to safety.

Billy was hungry. A household's sorrow and alarm had made him the victim of neglect. He found the fragrant morsel of beef after a time, and if some fine sense unknown to men warned him of danger, he took counsel of his appetite rather than his instinct.

And so a gallant gentleman died; and one is privileged to suppose that he was not without his reward.

CHAPTER XVI

Death gave to Slim Franks a dignity and a measure of honor he had not known in life. Those who had respected him least shared without hesitation in the task of preparing for his burial. A dentist, a grocer and a cotton buyer volunteered for the work of digging his grave, and every rose garden in town gave up its choicest blooms to deck his coffin.

A stranger might have interpreted these services as proof of the town's love for Slim. They were, in fact, no more than a philosophical acceptance of a necessary duty, and a desire to lighten the grief of those who mourned for him. The roses piled on his coffin expressed no more than a community's sympathy for his widow—a tribute, rather, to her grief; for it was commonly believed that what appeared to be a misfortune was in fact a blessing.

If there were any whose hard opinions of Slim had not been softened by his death,

these were silenced by the gentle criticism of Dr. Richards, who stood beside the coffin in the church and talked of judgments and immortality.

"I have not had the privilege of knowing a perfect man," said he, in conclusion. "It is a very easy matter to judge our fellows, but a very difficult matter to judge them justly—so difficult, in fact, that wisdom urges us to avoid the task. I have observed that those who have the least education feel the least need of it. Their very want renders them incapable of appreciating its value. So the man who appears to be evil may in fact be incapable of appreciating the great distance that separates him from virtue. He may strive continually to live up to standards that to him appear sufficient, and he may be constitutionally incapable of understanding that these standards are very low. I have in my church many generous men. They are generous by birth and training, and they give liberally and freely to every worthy cause. I have other members who are by nature and training the very opposite of liberal. In

their eyes money assumes a fictitious value. They are genuinely shocked when they observe people who part with money in a prodigal manner. They cannot understand the argument that money is useful only when spent. To them it seems a form of sacrilege. And when these who are stingy by nature and training open their purses and give a dollar, they give as liberally as other and more generous men who give a hundred dollars, for they have overcome no less of resistance. Some men are evil because they are sorely tempted and are by nature disposed to give way; others are good in a passive, colorless way because wickedness does not appeal to them. Goodness is praiseworthy always, but it deserves very little praise unless it is a vital and active goodness, strengthened by conflict with and conquest of temptation. No two of us are equipped by Nature with equal powers to appreciate virtue and overcome temptation; and no one of us is a standard by which his brothers are judged. If one has disobeyed God in any particular, he has disobeyed in all particulars; for it is

the spirit of obedience and not the letter that makes us his children. In one commandment, he says to us: 'Thou shalt not In another he says: 'A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another.' He did not place one commandment above the other, nor does he admit degrees of disobedience. When we stand before him, the one who has not loved his neighbor will stand at the side of him who has slain his brother; and we cannot doubt that the condemnation of the one will be the condemnation of the other. Each of us is handicapped from his birth. Only God can measure the handicap and make just allowance for it."

When Slim's body was buried and the red clay piled above it, the town people with one accord turned to the task of nursing Wharton. This was not a tribute to his personality. It was the custom in Oakville, as in other small towns, to accept serious illness as a burden upon the entire community.

Merchants, artisans and idlers divided the night into watches and chose their

hours of duty. At nightfall, two or three or more would gather at the Rogers home. receive a report of the patient's condition, and the instructions left by the doctor, and send the reluctant family to its rest. These watchers would sit in the hall and read. and the door to Wharton's room would stand a little open so that his least murmur could be heard. They felt at home, and when they had need of spoon or glass or towel or ice, they did not disturb the sleeping family but searched the premises until they found the thing required. As the night wore on, they retired to the porch to smoke and talk, and at intervals, fearing that the murmur of their voices had disturbed the patient or drowned his softer plea for some service, one of them would get to his feet and walk tiptoe to the door that stood ajar and stand listening until assured that the patient slept.

At midnight a new watch would appear, singly or in a group, their voices growing softer as they approached the house. These would receive instructions in their turn; there would be a murmur of good night

wishes, and again the house would be still except for the crackle of paper as a magazine page was turned or the creak of a chair as a watcher moved to a more comfortable position.

There were no watchers during the day, save the members of the family. Rogers quit his post at the cotton yard and remained at home to sit on the porch and smoke. Nancy sat beside Wharton's bed, rocking slowly, interminably plying her needle. At intervals she would replenish the ice water in the pitcher near his bed, or move a pillow that had become hot and moist, but she seldom spoke and the room was no less quiet for her presence.

Mrs. Rogers had few duties. If the women of the community were denied the privilege of nursing, they were free to cook. There was never a fire in the Rogers kitchen. When the breakfast hour came, there came also a neighbor with a heavy tray. The preparation of these trays was a matter of great pride. There would be a piece of linen, hand embroidered and monogrammed, beneath the dishes, and another

of similar pattern would cover them. The dishes would be silver or china, treasured pieces kept for use when pride and hospitality combined to serve an honored guest, and they would be garnished with infinite care.

These were substantial breakfasts of home-cured ham and fried chicken, with beaten biscuit and coffee, and strawberries that had stood overnight in sugar. Other neighbors would bring dinner and supper on similar trays, each anxiously awaiting her turn; but in the matter of cakes and similar delicacies, each felt free to bake when she chose and make her offering without consulting her sisters. So the number of cakes on the sideboard in the Rogers dining room grew daily, and those who watched by night would cut away generous slices for a midnight lunch.

If Wharton had eaten a tenth of the delicacies that were brought to him on special trays, neither a physician's skill nor the best of nursing could have saved him. But he lived in a dream world, where food did not seem an essential, and was

seldom conscious of the kindness that ministered to him.

There was never an hour throughout the five weeks of his illness when his mind lost contact with the things about him; but temperature is in some particulars similar to the stimulant of alcoholic beverages. It fires a mental energy that is not content with commonplace fact, but must range afield with fancy in quest of weird adventure. Asleep or awake he dreamed strange dreams—pleasant dreams, for the most part, and of an infinite variety.

After the first few days of torture, typhoid seems to repent of its harshness, and thereafter the patient is only conscious of a complete and amazing indifference. Are there ministering angels about him? They need not trouble themselves. Let them go about their affairs and leave him in peace. Does the doctor assure him that he is getting along nicely? What matter? Why should one wish to get along nicely? He is content with the world and all that therein dwell. If his business cannot get along without him, let it go to pot. What

is a business, anyway? And if it appears that he cannot weather the storm, and tear-dimmed eyes about his bed confess despair, he wonders not unkindly why people give way to foolish anxieties. After all, what is death? The thought of a complete and final rest has a distinct appeal; on the whole, the business of dying would require considerably less effort than the business of getting well, and he is heartily in favor of anything that will abolish effort.

During the third week of Wharton's illness he received a gift, though he was not to learn of it for another fortnight.

Oakville dearly loved a good dog. When the news of Billy's death got about town, and a post-mortem examination revealed strychnine in the stomach, there arose a storm of indignation that for a time threatened to make Bull Franks an outcast. No one doubted that Bull had poisoned the dog; and there were hot-heads who counseled a resort to corporal punishment. Wiser heads prevailed, however; and in the end the people of the community were content to make up a purse to buy another

dog. The task of finding another Collie of Billy's proud lineage and faultless markings was laid upon Uncle Gus.

When the dog arrived, he was led in state to the Rogers home and there delivered to the welcoming arms of Nancy. A collar that Billy had worn was placed about his neck—a collar of russet leather, overlaid with a silver filigree of intricate pattern and adorned with a plate that bore the name now thrust upon him.

He was a magnificent animal, with few equals in the world of Collies; but his markings were not those of Billy, and it was the collar he wore, rather than his own magnificence, that later brought to his master an old friend who had known the other Billy in a different world.

CHAPTER XVII

The mother instinct is the dominant force in the life of every normal woman. It is a force that may be chained and denied liberty, but it cannot be forgotten or overcome; and in some fashion it will make itself manifest. The little girl will be a mother to her dolls; in later years she will be a mother of children, or, being denied this privilege, will mother a man, or a woolly little dog with a pink nose, or a pot plant on a window sill.

Man's love for woman is never sexless. It is wholly selfish, and even when it bestows gifts it is but serving its own ends—baiting hooks—making payment in advance. Woman's love for man contains some finer quality that can only be described as altruistic. It is selfish, and yet it covets the privilege of serving. It qualifies her to become a mate, but qualifies her as well to be a ministering angel.

Nancy, filled with a love that pride [200]

would not permit her to confess, and tortured at times by the thought that her love would remain unrewarded, was nevertheless happy in rendering service. She began the day with a song in her heart, because the day brought her the privilege of sitting near his bed; each day was a season of perfect contentment because she was privileged at intervals to smooth his pillow or place a hand under his head while holding a glass of water to his lips. And each night, when her vigil was finished and her charge reluctantly surrendered, she would kneel beside her bed and offer a prayer to complete the day's service.

Nancy's prayers were selfish. She prayed that health might come again to the man she loved, and that with the coming of health he might learn to love her in return.

Nearly all sincere prayer is selfish. We either pray for ourselves, or for the things in which we are interested. "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me" was a selfish prayer. "Give us this day our daily bread" is wholly selfish. "Lord, have mercy on me" contains only thought of self.

Man's selfish motives may seem unworthy, but they have the virtue of honesty. Our lives are so complex, and our motives so mixed by reason of our hates and fears and ignorance and greed, that we are almost if not quite incapable of an impulse or activity wholly unselfish. If we make a sacrifice in some worthy cause, we are conscious of disappointment if none of our fellows commends us. If we give a fortune to charity, we are aggrieved if the newspapers contain no mention of our generosity. If we render a service to a neighbor across the street, we are prone to feel offended if he does not repay us with a gratitude well spiced with humility. When we pose as gods, we are never quite able to conceal the clay of which our feet are formed. We enjoy pretending to be nobler that we are, but in our hearts we know that self is the center of our universe. Our very griefs are selfish. We do not grieve because a loved one has lost life, but because we have lost a loved one.

To say that selfish prayers are unanswered is to say that only those prayers [202]

that refer to matters in which we have little genuine interest receive the attention of Heaven; which is to say that God listens to our indifference, but will not hear sincere and heartfelt petitions.

The Master of man's destiny is a God of reason, intelligence and justice. It is not conceivable that he will listen to the prayer of a man who will do nothing for himself. A man may grow corns on his knees and wear out his vocal cords asking God to make him a great physician, but his prayers will be futile unless he devotes a great deal of time and energy to the business of studying the theory and practice of medicine.

The answer to prayer depends upon two things: faith and sweat. The proportion is nine parts sweat and one part faith. The prayer of the man who expects God to do it all is wasted energy.

Nancy prayed that Wharton might be restored to health, and all her waking hours were devoted to the business of making the prayer effectual. She prayed that he might learn to love her, and by a thousand

services she sought to win his love. It is ungenerous to accuse her of immodesty. Modesty consists in concealing thoughts that are immodest. Her motives were secret; modesty could demand no more.

Only once during his illness did she confess her love, and there was none to witness her confession.

Temperature had so stimulated Wharton's mind that his hours of sleep were seasons of exciting adventure or of retrospection in which he lived anew with those who had shared his pleasures and his hours of leisure. He talked almost incessantly while he slept—a jumble of words that was seldom intelligible and yet confessed in fragments the life he had lived and the triumphs he had dreamed.

One afternoon as he slept and talked and moved restlessly upon his pillow, Nancy stood beside the bed to sponge his forehead with cool water. He lay still, but dreamed on without interruption, and in his dream he smiled. The smile was so intimate and so personal that Nancy suspected him of being awake and stooped to catch the words

he whispered. The words were not for her. Wharton was adventuring in another world in which there was a Gertrude whom he loved.

Nancy straightened as though from a blow. And there swept over her a fierce resentment against this Gertrude who had been a part of Wharton's other life and could yet intrude upon his dreams. What rights had any woman save the one who ministered to him now? A moment before this sick man had seemed her possession; now the intrusion of a name seemed to push her aside and dispute her claim. She vowed hotly that she would not be pushed aside; she would have this man's love, and she would defy her sex to take him from her.

Then it was that she stooped and pressed her lips to his forehead. It was not a gesture of tenderness or love, but of defiance and the fierce desire of possession. It was enough to calm her, and she turned away with a little laugh at her own folly. Let the world be full of Gertrudes; she had the field to herself.

The weeks passed swiftly, and slowly the fever subsided. The musical note began to return to Wharton's voice, and he insisted that his head be propped with pillows so that he might watch Nancy at her sewing. He began to exhibit symptoms of rebellion. These symptons were made more impressive by reason of his appearance, for he was a living portrait of the anarchist of fiction. His hair, that never before had been denied a barber's attention for longer than two weeks, was shaggy and unkempt; and the stubble that covered his thin cheeks and defiant chin would have lost him favor with any police judge in Christendom. His eyes alone were unchanged. They held the same calm assurance and hint of pride that had been theirs from the days of his childhood.

One day as Nancy bent above her work she felt Wharton's eyes upon her and looked up quickly, smiling. He did not smile in return. But there was in his eyes some new light of tenderness and eagerness and longing that caused her heart to beat so fast that she was almost overcome.

"What is it?" she whispered eagerly.

"I was dreaming," he said in a voice of infinite yearning, "of a great juicy steak with onions all over the premises."

And herein is proof of her great love: that after the first keen pang of disappointment she laughed naturally and merrily, and secretly thanked God that one of her prayers had been answered.

CHAPTER XVIII

When a sick man who has learned to lean upon temperature as a crutch finds himself deprived of fever and thrown upon his own resources, he is prone to find fault or lose interest in a world that has suddenly become drab and commonplace. But when he has conquered typhoid and the fever has left him, he feels that he is empty of all other things whatsoever; and the desire to eat becomes an obsession that is no less stimulating than temperature.

During the early days of Wharton's convalescence, when he lay propped among pillows, he gave Nancy a liberal education in the art of ordering a dinner. He introduced strange dishes and described them with a wealth of adjectives and an enthusiasm of affection that would have gained him international fame as a waiter; and when his fancy turned to steaks, and he dwelt upon the length and breadth and thickness a proper steak should possess, he

became lyric and taxed his rich vocabulary for superlatives. His feasts were all imaginary, however. When Nancy brought his tray, it contained only a rose, a few crackers, and a glass of milk. He was denied a second helping, and when he had finished his allowance it was only by a supreme effort of will that he was able to refrain from devouring the rose.

He gained strength rapidly. His first effort to walk was a complete and discouraging failure; but within a week he was sitting on the porch, listening to the mocking birds and wondering how they would taste in a pie. Nancy had returned to the house after helping him to a chair, and presently she reappeared with her fingers caught in the mane of a sable Collie. Wharton's eager words of greeting ended abruptly, and he lifted bewildered eyes to the face of the girl.

"That isn't Billy," said he.

"It's another Billy," she answered gently. Then she sat on the steps at his feet and told him the story of the friend who had fought to save his life, of the death of Slim,

and of one who came in the night with poisoned meat.

"We couldn't know, of course," she finished. "But here, where none of us has secrets and each can understand the motives of his neighbor, it is not difficult to fix guilt by elimination. The people about town could not punish Mr. Franks, for they had no evidence against him; but they wished to show themselves your partisans, and that is the reason they bought this second Billy for you."

"They have been very kind," replied Wharton; but his voice was lifeless and there was a hard look in his eyes. Nancy talked on, but he answered only in monosyllables; and presently she left him and returned to the house. When she was gone, he pulled up the sleeve of his dressing gown and examined his forearm ruefully.

"I can wait," he said grimly.

Uncle Gus came often to see him, and it was during one of these visits, as the two sat on the porch, that Wharton voiced his first complaint.

"I gain strength very slowly," said he.

"Why, son," replied the other; "you're doin' right well. Gittin' over typhoid ain't no one-day job." Then his crafty old eyes narrowed, and he asked: "What's your special hurry all at oncet?"

"I have a little debt to pay," returned

Wharton grimly.

Uncle Gus moved his chair closer.

"Meanin' Bull?" he asked.

"Meaning Bull."

"Now look here, son," said Uncle Gus; "don't you go to hatin' nobody. It's malice, mostly, that makes folks no account."

"I don't hate him," Wharton answered evenly. "It is more a feeling of loathing. He is an evil thing, to be trodden under foot. I do not wish to handle him, for I know that I shall feel unclean when the task is finished. But he or his brother attacked me in cowardly fashion, and he poisoned my dog. He wants breaking." He held his hands before him and opened and closed them slowly. "When these are strong again," he finished, "I shall break him."

Uncle Gus pulled placidly at his pipe, and presently chuckled.

"Funny how a man feels about his dog," said he. "Here you are jest itchin' to beat up Bull on account o' him killin' Billy, which you ain't got no proof he done, an' yit you don't give Bull no credit for killin' a dog what killed his brother."

Wharton was silent, and Uncle Gus pursued his advantage.

"It ain't no harder for you to lose your dog than what it was for Bull to lose his brother, son. Bull, he acted accordin' to his lights, jest like Billy done; an' most likely he's willin' to call it square. If I was you, I wouldn't do nothin'."

"If Billy killed this man Franks, he did it in the line of duty," returned Wharton. "He fought in the open, against a man who was armed with a club. The man who poisoned him was an assassin, who risked nothing and gave the dog no chance for his life. Their cases are not analogous; the world rewards loyal servants and hangs assassins."

"It don't do no private hangin'; not

with the sanction o' law. The's a regular program for sich things. Law don't see no difference 'twixt a private hangin' and a private killin'."

Wharton smiled, but shook his head.

"It's a fact, son. An' you're jest foolin' yourself when you talk about breakin' Bull an' make out you don't hate him. Maybe you don't start off hatin' him, but hate grows easy. You set here and dream about lickin' him and think maybe you're a ca'm and placid instrument o' justice, but directly you ain't studyin' about justice. You git a grudge in you bigger'n a mule, an' it pizens you. You can't think o' nothin' else. You can't think straight no more, nor see straight. Don't make no difference what plans you make nor what you do; this here grudge keeps drivin' you, and after while you've done ruined your whole life tryin' to git even."

He paused to relight his pipe.

"Nations is like that. They might could git along peaceful like, but they ain't hankerin' to. They make out they want peace, but down deep inside 'em they keep

on nursin' grudges and dreamin' o' the time when they'll git even. If they hadn't lost ever' lick o' sense the Lord give 'em, they'd know they was cuttin' off their own noses to spite their faces; but their grudges has done made 'em crazy, and they keep on buildin' forts an' ships an' guns, and payin' taxes and goin' hungry—talkin' hate and thinkin' hate—punishin' theirselves to punish the other feller."

He sighed heavily.

"Nations don't never forgive nothin'. If one gits licked, it sulks and plans to git even some time. Reminds me o' Joe Blakely an' his wife. Joe an' Sally was both high-strung, an' they was always naggin' at one another. Once in a while, Joe he'd lose his temper right, an' then he'd git out his knife an' slash Sally's clothes up. Then Sally, she'd git mad an' git the scissors and cut Joe's clothes all to pieces. Then they'd make up an' buy new clothes. Kep' 'em busted, spitin' one another. Nations is like that. Keep theirselves poor, so's to pay back a lickin' they got one time. Folks calls it patriotism an' makes nice

speeches about it; but it ain't nothin' but lack o' sense. Tryin' to avoid doin' right puts folks to a lot o' trouble, an' costs 'em a sight o' money."

He stopped and studied Wharton anxiously.

"Son," he said earnestly, "give up this here grudge business. I ain't aimin' to take up for Bull, an' I ain't doubtin' he needs beatin' up; but I declare I sure hate to see you feelin' that way. It looks kind o' foolish to me."

Wharton flushed. "Let's not talk about it," said he. "If I am capable of a foolish desire for revenge, I am also capable of gratitude; and it may be that the loss of Billy brought me other friendships worth as much. People have been very kind to me."

"They was jest bein' neighbors, was all," said Uncle Gus; and he began to talk of other things. He did not again mention Bull Franks.

Wharton felt that he had been rebuked, and conceded that the rebuke was just; he coveted the good opinion of this old philosopher who made the world's affairs

his own; but the desire to avenge the death of Billy mastered him. He hated foul play, and some measure of that hatred extended to all who were not fair.

After his talk with Uncle Gus, he did not permit his mind to dwell upon the thought of vengeance, but as he sat in his chair or lay across his bed he tensed and relaxed his muscles in unconscious rhythm and sought by an effort of will to hasten the day when he should be himself again.

CHAPTER XIX

The closing days of July found Wharton again in condition. The thin cushion of fat that idleness and the appetite of a convalescent had built above the region known in sporting circles as the "solar plexus" had given place to corrugated sinews of steel, and long tramps over the hills had restored his ability to sprint without quickened breath. His skin had darkened to a nut brown.

With renewed health had come a return of ambition. He was no longer content with idleness. The energy stored in his wonderful body urged him to action. He did not covet applause or dream of triumphs, but desired only some task suited to his abilities—some honorable part in the world's labor.

Oakville had nothing to offer him. It would be necessary to quit this Arcadia, where all were content with their trivial affairs, and find some duty in the outer

world of struggle and adventure. But first he must wipe the slate clean. He had been beaten with a club, and pride demanded that he exact payment in kind. His dog had been poisoned, and common justice demanded that the guilty man be made to suffer. He would go away, but he would take with him the full measure of his self-respect.

One evening when he was returning from the hills and was yet two miles from town, he quickened his pace to a trot and so continued with unbroken stride until he gained the shelter of the trees on the Rogers lawn. Five minutes later, when he stepped from under a needle shower and began a brisk rubbing of his gliding muscles, he grinned with the sheer joy of physical wellbeing and said to the walls about him: "To-morrow is the day. To-morrow I pay my debt." He chuckled, and lapsed into the vernacular. "What it takes, I've got it," said he.

The morrow was not a day of battle. Wharton joined the early-morning group at the post office, and later strolled casually

from store to store, stopping to talk of trivial matters, but the man he sought was not abroad. He was tempted to visit the stable and carry the war into the enemy's camp, but the record of his own defeat was public property and his self-respect demanded witnesses to the conquest and humiliation of Bull Franks.

When he returned to the Rogers home late in the afternoon and found Nancy sitting on the porch, her first words caused him to be thankful that his quest had been without success.

"Big meeting begins to-night," she greeted him.

Wharton had intended that his fight should be a nine-day wonder. He had planned to stage it publicly and purposely to prolong it, so that those who witnessed it and those who heard the story of it would treasure the memory long after the story of his own humiliation had been forgotten. Now he realized that he had but narrowly escaped conflict with a competitive attraction that would have taken away the half of his reward; and had, more-

over, as narrowly escaped offending his friends by affording the town an exciting topic of conversation to lessen interest in the meetings.

These annual meetings, as he well knew, were great events in the life of Oakville.

In August of each year, when the crops were laid by and business marked time, the churches invited preachers from a distance and held protracted meetings or revival services. The lay members of the church referred to this season of spiritual exaltation as "big meetin'."

The preachers who were invited to conduct the services were seldom more able than the men whose pulpits they filled, but they accomplished more than the local preachers could accomplish.

We rather enjoy being scolded by a stranger, for we know that he means nothing personal; but our own pastors know us so well that any pointed criticism they make seems a personal insult. Moreover, familiarity has deprived the local preachers of some of the glory of their priesthood; they are but men, to be called Dick or Harry,

while a preacher from a distance may be a messenger from Sinai.

Services were held every morning and night. At first the morning congregations were composed almost entirely of women, but after a few days the men would begin to get interested and agree to close their places of business during the hour of service. The other men, who had no places of business, being thus deprived of a place to loaf, would begin to attend the meetings for want of anything better to do.

If the preacher had a good voice, an easy command of words, and the ability to say truthful things in a manner that caused men to move uneasily on their seats, word would go about that the big meetin' was worth while, and people would drive into town from a distance of eight or ten miles; so that, as the meeting progressed, it would be necessary to bring chairs from neighboring homes to fill the aisles and the vestibule.

The effect of a protracted meeting is cumulative. One hears the first two or three sermons and comes away with the comfortable conviction that the preacher

is going after one's neighbors roughshod. As the days pass, this consciousness of aloof superiority wears away and one begins to apply the preacher's sayings to oneself. Thereafter he experiences a delightful sense of freedom; he has broken his shell of reserve, and being emboldened by a new sense of humility is ready to walk among his fellows without pose or dissimulation and confess himself no greater than the least of them.

It is this breaking down of reserve that marks the beginning of the meeting's success. When men become as little children they immediately get into communication with the kingdom of Heaven. A psychologist made cynical by much learning will say that men are a mob hypnotized by their own enthusiasm, but men who have had experience of these matters know that the Spirit of God is among those who worship him. A cynic is one who mocks the things his learning will not permit him to understand.

After the third or fourth day, when the meeting has become the big interest of the

community and the very air in the church seems to hold a benediction, the preacher makes the first test of his work. The test is usually made at night, when the congregation is largest and the cares of the day have been forgotten. After the sermon, the choir begins to sing one of the grand old hymns and the preacher steps down in front of the pulpit and invites the sinners to come forward and confess their Lord.

The first to come will be girls and boys of the Sunday school, long accustomed boldly to declare their faith, and now but accepting an opportunity to unite with the church. If these are all that come, the test will seem to promise failure. But usually there will be a church member who has turned to his own way, and, finding it profitless, is eager again to find peace for his soul; he will walk boldly down the aisle, having gone that way before, and his example will encourage a few of those known in the vernacular as hard-boiled eggs, and these will step out quickly, as water rushes forward when at last it breaks through an obstruction. Usually their faces are twitch-

ing and their eyes filled, but there is something in their bearing like that of men who step forward when the commander asks for volunteers.

On one occasion, when a preacher holding meetings in Oakville had issued his invitation and in the hush that followed had asked for sentence prayers, an old man who had long scoffed at religion declared solemnly: "O Lord, I'm meaner'n a dog," and being unable to reach the aisle began to climb over the backs of the pews.

For some reason difficult to understand, a public declaration of faith in the Lord requires a great deal of backbone, and for this reason young men frequently confess him in groups—chums stepping forward together, each lending countenance to the other. The members of a set wait upon a leader, and thus it is that personal workers who are the preacher's lieutenants concentrate their attack on the more picturesque sinners. At times a meeting that appears to be a failure will rush forward like a prairie fire when some hard and well-loved reprobate is swept off his feet.

The last meeting of the series is usually a sort of love feast. Everybody is happy and humble and natural. Church members have made up their quarrels and exchanged apologies. Business rivals have forgotten their rivalry, and all of the misunderstandings have been explained away, so that the community makes a new start in fellowship and mutual respect and the world seems as fresh and as delightful as it was on that first day.

CHAPTER XX

Wanting other means of filling the hours between nightfall and bedtime, Wharton accepted an invitation from Nancy and walked with her to the church. Already the street was filled with milling cars, maneuvering for parking space, and the sweep of their lamps revealed young men and boys grouped upon the church steps to await the first notes of the organ.

The windows were open to their fullest to catch each breath of air, and from within the church came the low murmur of voices, like the drone of swarming bees. Ceiling fans whirred above, but the sound of their industry was drowned by a hundred palm leaves that stirred the air at the cost of a physical effort that defeated their purpose and left their owners perspiring the more.

Men who had gone about their affairs coatless and with sleeves rolled to their elbows now sat swathed in coats, many of them wool, and at intervals mopped their

faces with handkerchiefs already grown limp.

Nancy left Wharton in the aisle and went to the choir loft. He glanced about uncertainly, saw Uncle Gus, and accepted the invitation of a beckoning finger. Sitting by Uncle Gus during big meeting was no mean privilege; for the old man's easy bass held a quality like that of the organ pipes, and dropped to the low notes with a rumble suggestive of majestic storm clouds massing on the horizon.

Doctor Richards introduced the man who had come to do the preaching, and then stepped down from the pulpit and sat with the congregation. The preacher had grown old in harness. His face was marked with countless wrinkles, and his piercing black eyes looked out beneath heavy brows that appeared by contrast even whiter than the snow of his hair. He did not gesture. He used none of the tricks of oratory. When he began to speak, he stepped aside from the pulpit and stood with his hands clasped behind his back, rocking thus from toe to heel, his words coming smoothly, easily,

without apparent emphasis. He used a tone of ordinary conversation, yet his voice carried well and was the more impressive because it did not extend itself to impress.

Wharton enjoyed the sermon. He admired the logic and the simplicity of it, and if at times it led where his faith could not follow, he listened still and paid tribute to the preacher's grave sincerity. The arguments did not impress him; they were not new; but the man was an earnest and able advocate, and the unfolding of his campaign promised to be interesting.

Wharton's interest was not personal. It was an admixture of academic and professional interest. It was the interest of a psychologist. To him the meeting meant no more than an experiment in reactions. It was a clinic.

Yet each morning and evening service found him sitting at the side of Uncle Gus, and at times he relaxed his mental vigilance and gave himself up to an unaffected enjoyment of the service.

This enjoyment was short-lived. When the fourth night sermon was finished, the

preacher asked the congregation to stand for the closing hymn and issued his first invitation. Wharton listened closely to the wording of it.

"Each of you who is honest with himself," said the preacher, "is conscious of sin. He knows that he cannot hope to win to Heaven on his record. No man can. And if one among you is ready to stand out before this people and confess his sins—to confess his faith in the Christ and accept him as Lord and Master, let him come and offer me his hand and find peace unto his soul."

There had been no appeal to the emotions of the people; there had been no visible sign of soul-stirring among them; and yet as the choir sang, a number of girls and women found their way to the aisles and stepped forward, and one smooth-faced boy with the stature of a man pushed past Wharton and felt his way blindly to the aisle. Wharton saw his face and was conscious of a distinct shock. The boy's lips were twitching, and tears filled his eyes and ran down his cheeks.

The evidence of an emotion so profound stirred in Wharton a feeling of mingled pity and wonder. It seemed an effect out of all proportion to the cause. Nothing in the preacher's sermon or invitation had suggested tears or the need of them. Obviously the boy was no great sinner. And yet his emotions had been stirred to their depths, and when he returned to his seat his shining face proved that he had not missed a reward.

There were similar scenes at the close of each subsequent meeting, and each served to add to Wharton's bewilderment, until in time bewilderment became resentment.

When a number of children are playing along a hedgerow and one, having perceived a brilliant butterfly among the foliage, exclaims in wonder and delight, his playfellows turn and scan the hedge eagerly to share in the treat. One by one they discover the butterfly, and each in his turn shouts in triumph, but if there is one among them whose slower eyes are unrewarded he will cry: "Where? Where?" And as dis-

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appointment intensifies his eagerness, he will begin to feel a very real resentment because he has been denied a share in the pleasure of his fellows.

A similar feeling took possession of Wharton. These people about him were stirred by an emotion in which he had no share. Its source lay deeper than he could fathom.

He knew himself the intellectual superior of any individual in the congregation. He was sincere in his belief that he alone had understood and properly valued the preacher's skillful reasoning. Yet the preacher's skill had left him unmoved, while these about him were vibrant with an exaltation he had never known.

His first resentment gave place to an amused tolerance. He felt himself a superior creature, standing aloof to smile at the play acting of children. These simple folk were hypnotized by a herd spirit. They were beside themselves. They had given way to hysteria, and now wept and rejoiced because they had fallen prey to their imaginations.

Thus he soothed his vanity and sought to explain away the strange impulses that tormented him, but each time the preacher's invitation was given and men and women stepped forward, his bewilderment returned and he stood tense and eager, striving with all the power of his mind to catch a clue that would explain away the mystery.

One night as he stood thus, his hands clasped tightly on the back of a pew, he was conscious of an impulse almost beyond the powers of his resistance. It was as though an invisible physical force sought to thrust him forward. He drew back sharply, shamed by his momentary weakness, and upbraided himself for this near approach to a hysterical folly.

Yet on the following night, when he entered the church with Nancy and sought his accustomed place by Uncle Gus, the feeling returned with an increased intensity even before the service began.

For the first time in his life he lost faith in himself. He was no longer his own master. He knew that if he remained until the end of the service and heard again the

invitation to go forward, all his power of will could not keep him in his pew. The thought of being impelled by any other force than his reason filled him with an unaccountable terror. He felt that he was being driven to an action that would be absurd—that would humiliate him beyond his power to recover self-respect. And abruptly, in self-defense, he made his way to the aisle and fled.

Once in the open street, he fell into his long stride and rapidly left the church behind. His thoughts were incoherent. He was a prey to emotions—strange and inexplicable emotions that left his mind in turmoil. He was filled with anger that coined scornful phrases to rebuke his cowardice and his weakness; he was filled with fear that questioned his sanity; he was filled with awe and dread of any impulse or emotion that could so nearly drive him against his will.

He walked rapidly, and slowly the physical effort cleared his mind and brought him back to the present. He glanced about him in the darkness to find some landmark.

On either side of the gray road were black fields of cotton, unstirred by any breath of air. The night was soundless, save for the tramp of his own feet in the dust. Ahead of him, and to the right, a shadow darker than the night revealed the mass of the pine wood where he once had kept rendezvous with thoughts that tormented him.

He turned away from the road and was enveloped in the blackness of the wood. He advanced slowly, feeling his way. The needles rustled on either side and aloft were mysterious noises as little creatures of the night scurried from the path of the invader.

He pushed forward without hesitation and presently, topping a little rise, began to descend into the little hollow. Here he moved warily until his foot struck the fallen tree. Then, arrived at his destination, he at once forgot his surroundings and began to subject himself to an examination.

Strangely, his anger and his fear were gone. He was again his own master. A consciousness of victory over himself brought a return of his interest in the

psychology of his reactions, and he began quite calmly to study the causes that had brought him so near to surrender.

Thinking brought him no reward. The impulse that had so nearly mastered him had no root in reason. At length, perplexed and a little annoyed by his own impotence and the futility of logic, he changed his tactics and began an honest effort to persuade himself that he was in the wrong. Here again his effort was fruitless. Logic had persuaded him to doubt; it could not in turn persuade him to believe.

A feeling of hopelessness began to assail him, and with hopelessness his thoughts turned away from himself and reached out for God.

He slipped from the log to his knees and lifted his eyes to the stars that gleamed faintly through the tops of the pines.

He had had no experience of prayer. He had delivered many prayers to the cultured people of his congregation. He had never prayed to his God.

At first the words came haltingly. He sought to place them in orderly sequence—

to fashion phrases that would express his doubts—to win Heaven's attention by means of pretty language. But slowly there came over him a consciousness of helplessness and humility, a hunger for guidance into a way he had missed, a great scorn of himself and an awe of the Power that had brought him to his knees.

Unconsciously he lifted his voice until it rang among the pines like the vibrant peal of an organ in a vast and deserted cathedral. It cried of despair and doubt; rising, falling, in an agony of pleading, and its wonderful resonance was hurled among the pines and echoed far in the still fields, until the very air seemed filled with the music of it and the solemn night was glorified as by the hosannas of a celestial choir.

An ancient negro woman, cook to the Miss Amy Smith who kept the house where Uncle Gus made his home, had been to the country afoot to visit her people, and returning after nightfall had come abreast of the pine wood as Wharton began to pray. She did not hear his first broken sentences, but as his voice lifted in appeal

she stopped abruptly and turned to the wood, her eyes gleaming white in the light of the stars. While she stood poised and trembling, the voice grew stronger until it seemed to fill the wood and all the quiet hills that lay abroad. For a moment she stood petrified with awe and terror, and then in one swift movement she stooped to gather her skirts and was away to a flying start, her ancient feet spurning the ground as she sought safety in distance.

Uncle Gus found her sitting on the porch of Amy Smith's home when he returned from church, and listened with many an appreciative chuckle while she told the tale of her adventure.

"Hit wa'n't no mortal man, Mistah Gus," the old woman finished. "Dey ain' no man whatsumever got a voice lak dat. Dat was a he angel fum gloryland, sho'. Lawd be good to niggers! Ah lef' dat place."

Uncle Gus went on into the house, still chuckling. His old heart was light. He knew there was but one voice in the vicin-

ity of Oakville that held a quality to inspire thought of celestial beings, and he knew that a man does not pray in a wood at night except his spirit be in quest of balm.

CHAPTER XXI

The heat of late afternoon lay like a blight on the town. The leaves of the water oaks along Main street hung listless and still, and there was no sign of life or motion save where some miniature whirlwind lifted the dust in spirals.

Uncle Gus left his chair under the awning, knocked the ashes from his pipe, and entered the bank. He returned presently with a gourd dipper in his hand, and stepped to the town pump in the center of the street. His influence had given Oakville water and sewer systems, but the town pump had been left undisturbed as a concession to sentiment, and he professed to believe its water purer and sweeter than any liquid drawn from faucets.

While he stood pumping to clear the pipe of warm water, a long gray car crept down the street and came to a stop at his side. A lean little man in cap and linen

duster got out of the car and stood stretching the cramp from tired muscles.

Uncle Gus proffered the brimming gourd. "Have a drink, brother," said he. The stranger accepted gratefully, and having drunk his fill lingered a moment, with a hand on the car door, to make conversation.

"How far is it to Charleston?" he asked. "Can I make it to-night?"

"Not if you aim to sleep much. Two hundred miles, maybe; mostly bad roads. Better stop off in Columbia. If you drive peart, you'll likely git to Columbia an hour by sun."

The stranger's eyes rested for a moment on a sable Collie that stood lapping from the pump trough.

"Splendid dog you have," said he.

"Purty good dog," agreed Uncle Gus. "Belongs to a friend o' mine."

The stranger snapped his fingers, and the Collie approached, wagging a friendly tail. The little man stooped to worry the dog's head, and having felt a collar under the heavy fur peered closer to examine it.

When he looked up, his face wore a look of bewilderment.

"I have seen another collar like that," said he.

"Most likely," agreed Uncle Gus.

"Not at all likely," contradicted the stranger. "I think it the same collar. Is Robert Wharton in this place?"

"Is he a friend o' yourn?" countered Uncle Gus.

"He was pastor of my church."

"You don't say. Young feller, with a voice like a bell?"

"Then he is here," said the stranger with conviction. "Where can I find him?"

Uncle Gus turned and pointed. "He's boardin' with Cal Rogers in that there white house in the trees," said he.

The little man got into his car, and Uncle Gus returned sadly to his chair. He began to fear that he had found a new friend but to lose him.

Wharton lay in a hammock under the trees, fashioning plans for his future. He saw the gray car as it parked at the edge of the walk, and sat erect. Then as the little

man in the linen duster approached across the lawn, he got quickly to his feet and offered welcoming hands.

"Henry West, from the land of the flesh pots," he cried. "What kind fortune brings you to a place like this?"

"We're putting in a branch at Charleston," returned the other, "and I'm motoring through to get things started. Have an engagement there in the morning. Now what are you doing here?"

"Vegetating," said Wharton cheerfully. "Readjusting my world. Share my hammock and tell me all about yourself."

"Same old grind," said West. "We've missed you. Have you kept in touch with anybody?"

"No; I burned my bridges."

"I suspected as much. When you went away without a word for any of us, I told the reporters you had gone up into the Canadian woods to rest. I had to tell them something in order to discourage gossip." He studied his companion quizzically. "You're looking fit," he suggested.

"Never better," returned Wharton, "I

had a bout with fever, but won through and am none the worse for it. I am beginning to tire of my vacation."

"We'll be glad to have you back," said West. "I think it can be arranged."

"I'm afraid I can't go back," said Wharton. "I have traveled a long way here in Oakville, and learned a number of curious things."

"You won't give up the ministry?" Wharton hesitated.

"That," said he at length, "is one of the curious things I have learned. I wasn't a preacher of the Gospel. I was a mock priest, without authority or right. I can't return to that sort of thing. I will not preach unless I am persuaded that I have a call to preach."

"Nonsense, Wharton. That is talk of the dark ages. You can't sacrifice a career for want of a hunch."

Wharton laughed. "I have traveled far, indeed," said he. "You talk a language I had almost forgotten." Then he became suddenly grave. "Henry," said he, "I found God in a pine wood last night. I

have no more doubts or fears or anxieties. I know that my Redeemer liveth. I shall serve Him all my days, but I shall not preach except He call me."

West was astonished and embarrassed. He stooped to fumble with the lace of a shoe. He felt the hurt and shame a man feels when he discovers that a cherished friend is a little mad in some particular. Then he banished his doubts as unworthy and tried diplomacy.

"I had almost forgotten a piece of news," he began casually. "A little while after you went away, word got about that Broyles and Gertrude Hellams were engaged. There was no formal announcement; just a rumor. Later we heard they had broken it off, and late in June Broyles married one of those hail-fellow Westmoreland girls. I suspect Gertrude would be glad to see you again." He leaned forward and placed a hand on Wharton's knee. "Forgive me for mentioning it if it isn't a thing you can talk about; but I wish to influence you if I can. Will it make any difference?"

"None at all," answered Wharton evenly.

"When I burned the bridges, I left no foot logs."

West sighed and got to his feet. "I'm sorry I can't stay longer," said he. "I must get into Columbia to-night."

The two men walked to the car. As West settled in his seat, he turned and offered a hand.

"Don't let my talk change your plans," he said gravely. "I am an old pagan, and scarce believe anything at all. I have wondered a great many times if there isn't something we have missed, and if you are on the trail of it I would not dissuade you. Let me hear from you when you can."

The gears meshed sweetly and the car began to move. Wharton turned back to the trees and resumed the thread of his planning.

"Talk of the dark ages," he mused.

"There were mighty men in those days.

I wonder if one who has been so far away will be able to hear a call if it comes."

CHAPTER XXII

A shaded globe, hanging low above a flat-topped desk, threw soft shadows upon the book-lined walls of the study. Doctor Richards sat in an easy-chair beside the desk, eyes downcast, absently fingering his watch chain. Long experience had taught him that persons who came to his study in quest of counsel or encouragement were best served if he kept his eyes turned away while they told of the wrongs they had done or of their present needs.

Wharton occupied a chair in the shadow. He had finished his story, and now sat waiting.

Doctor Richards sat erect, and smiled as he met Wharton's eyes.

"My son," said he, "you have two wonderful gifts. Words are your slaves, and your voice makes them effective. When the Master gives us a talent, He expects us to use it in His service."

"But surely," Wharton objected, "there is some more definite call."

"Perhaps," returned the other. "I do not know. Man's first duty is to love and serve God; his second is to love and serve his fellows. To this service all men are called. I do not believe that the age of miracles is past; I do not believe that God no longer talks to men; I do not believe that we are without inspiration from him. God equips the poet and calls him to the duty of inspiring and teaching; the explorer, the scientist, the musician—all these are called to their duties. Each of us who is given the ability to render a service in any particular, and feels an eagerness to use his ability for the glory of God and the betterment of His creatures, may go his way with the assurance that God has called him to His work."

"Was I, then, called in the beginning?"

"You were called, my son; but you did not hear. Our faintest cry is heard in Heaven, but it frequently happens that we do not hear God. When He gave you the equipment to serve Him, He gave you a

commission to serve. You failed and suffered because you gave Him lip service only. You did not give Him yourself."

"This is true," said Wharton. "I was a play actor. But now I am His servant,

eager to give Him everything."

"Then give, brother. I do not think you can be mistaken. There may be good and faithful men who have entered the ministry without a call. God does not demand the impossible. He does not call us to a duty we cannot perform. If He sets us a task, He gives us the equipment for it. The business of a preacher is to persuade people to believe in Jesus and give their hearts to Him. 'By their fruits ye shall know them.' Only those who bear no fruit are serving without authority."

"Then I shall not know until I try?"

"Not until you try, my son. But I am persuaded that He will use you. If He does not call incompetents to great tasks, neither will He be content to employ great abilities in a small matter. One who has but a little talent can serve a number of His people, keep them steadfast and win

their children to His cause; while for one who has greater abilities there are larger fields; and finally, for those to whom He has given superb equipment, there is the wide world to conquer. I preach, for the most part, to those who have long since given their hearts to Him. Those who are unsaved will not come to hear me. But you, by His grace and by reason of the talents He has given you, may travel about and preach in great cities to thousands who have need of Him. The evangelist extends His frontiers; we are but humble workmen to keep His garden."

As he finished speaking, the door of the study opened to admit one of the officers of the church.

"Excuse me for intruding," said the newcomer, "but we have just received word that Doctor Lewis is ill, and it's almost time to begin the service."

"All right, brother," said Doctor Richards; "we'll be out in a few minutes. Announce a hymn, and let the choir begin the service."

When the door was closed, Doctor Rich-

ards got to his feet and offered his hand.

"Do you wish to try?" he asked gravely. "I'll try," said Wharton.

As the two men came out of the study, Wharton stood a moment, blinking in the brighter light of the church. Doctor Richards touched his arm, and together they mounted the steps to the pulpit. The choir had finished singing; whispers died away; palm leaf fans came to rest; the house was very still.

Doctor Richards spoke briefly, explaining the absence of the visiting preacher. "Mr. Wharton will preach for us to-night," he finished; and took his seat among the congregation. As he sat down there was a little rustle of excitement, like the passing of a gust of wind. Neighbor turned inquiring eyes to neighbor, mute testimony of wonder and a little alarm.

Wharton bowed his head in his hands and stood thus, minute after minute, unwittingly prolonging the tension; and when he lifted his head there was an audible sigh as the people drew breath again.

He began to turn the leaves of the pulpit Bible, slowly, aimlessly, like one bewildered. Presently he straightened with decision, as one will who has studied many paths and at last has come upon the right way, and began to read—not loudly, but in a voice so clear that every perfect syllable carried to the farthest pew.

"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all."

He closed the Bible softly, and with his hands resting upon it began to talk of hate—of the travail and sorrow man has brought upon himself through all the ages because of the malice in his heart; of homes that know only restraint and discontent because of a misunderstanding magnified and turned to bitterness; of friends estranged and doomed by their own stubborn pride to hunger for companionship; of neighbors dwelling within a stone's throw of one another, and yet divided by a gulf as wide as the earth, and robbed of joy because of it; of battle fields strewn with the bodies of

men, and of women and children begging bread because of malice in the hearts of those having great authority; of a wartorn world suffering and destitute because of a long-nurtured hatred between the races of men.

He painted with words, and yet some magic in them or in his ringing voice made the pictures live and breathe, so that the race of man seemed stripped of its fine trappings of boasted civilization and revealed naked and ugly in its sordid folly.

Presently his voice softened, and he began to speak of love—of kindness, and the willingness to forgive; of that peace, passing all understanding, that is the heritage of those who bear no malice; of Him who loved men and taught them to love one another and do good; of the world this might be if men would learn of Him and labor together in mutual respect and forbearance; asking only what they are willing to give; giving all they are willing to ask; living as men and the sons of God, and not as beasts.

When he had finished, he stepped down [252]

from the pulpit and stood on the floor in front of it. "Before I give the invitation," said he, "I have a confession to make. I have not been free of malice. There is one among you whom I, in my heart, have wronged. I had purposed doing him an injury, and thought thereby to feed my pride. It was a vain and foolish purpose, and the memory of it shames me. Last night I found God, and now I would live in peace and fellowship with all mankind. I wish to apologize to this man, and to ask his forgiveness."

He waited, looking neither to the right nor left. The silence continued moment after moment. Presently there was a scuffle of feet and a creaking of pews in the back of the church, and Bull Franks made his way to an aisle. He was pale, but his head was high, and he advanced with a quick and confident step. Wharton met him at the aisle, offering an eager hand. Bull accepted it, and turned to face the congregation.

"Mr. Wharton ain't done me no harm," he said loudly. "He ain't to blame for

nothin'. I holp Slim beat him up, an' I made my nigger poison his dog. I'm as low down as dirt. I've been sorry an' full o' meanness all my life, an' I want to git right. If you folks and God will help me, I'm a goin' to do different."

Both men had spoken with apparent calmness, but those who sat near could see that Bull was trembling and that he was very near to breaking down. Uncle Gus was one of those who saw and understood, and his own soft heart melted. He got to the aisle, stumbling in his haste, and in a moment more had Bull in his arms. Twice he essayed to speak, but the words caught in his throat; and Bull, utterly unmanned by the sight of the old man's emotion, gave way and sank to his knees, sobbing and broken.

Wharton, his own voice none too steady, turned again to the congregation.

"My brethren," said he, "the Spirit of God is with us here. The impulse you feel is from Him. He is pleading with you now, as He has plead these many years, to forsake the way of malice and unkindness and wrong, and give your hearts to Him. If

you will surrender, I promise you, in His name, an infinite joy and contentment. Come, if you will, and give me your hand in token of surrender to Him who loved you and gave Himself for you."

He had scarcely finished speaking when the aisles began to fill. A few who came were women and girls, but the greater number were men—old men who had spent their lives outside of the church because of malice held against some one within it; younger men who were the more willing to acknowledge Christ as Lord because of Bull's courageous example; boys yet short of their majority, easily persuaded to believe because of their great respect for Wharton.

As these came forward, some pale and grave of countenance, some shaken by deep emotion, some smiling with a joy already attained, there was a cross current of movement as members of the church sought out those with whom they were not in perfect fellowship and began to clear away the misunderstandings that had endured for months or years.

When all had come who would, Wharton turned inquiringly to Doctor Richards, who sat in one of the front pews. The old preacher got to his feet, smiling with happiness, and stood for a moment with his hands on Wharton's shoulders.

"Your way is clear now, my son," said he. And Wharton, smiling as happily, answered from a heart filled with gratitude: "All clear, Doctor."

The church emptied slowly. Wharton met Nancy as she came down from the choir loft, and kept her at his side as he shook hands and exchanged good-night wishes with the members of the congregation.

They walked home together, loitering in the heavy shadows of the water oaks. Wharton was conscious of a peace that left nothing to be desired—a peace that was in large measure a product of the calm assurance in his own heart, and yet was made complete by the presence of the girl who walked by his side. He knew, without surprise or shock of discovery, that life could not be wholly joyous except she remained always at his side.

It frequently happens that those who love deeply and unselfishly feel no thrill of ecstacy, but only a complete contentment. Between two who love thus there is a perfect understanding long before words of love are spoken. There is no cause to plead; there are no barriers to break down. The two are one, and neither doubts. To such as these, the confession of love and the exchange of vows come without conscious preparation—a look, a touch of hands, a word, and they are in one another's arms.

It was thus with Wharton and Nancy. When they left the walk and came under the trees of the lawn, he drew her close and she lifted her face for his kiss. And not until then did he say the words she had longed to hear: "I love you, Nancy."

"I love you, Robert," she whispered.

And again, as when the world was young, the man and the woman were happy, and God blessed them.

















